

Emigrant Experiences: Zoroastrians in the USA

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the immigrant experiences of the Zoroastrian Iranian-Americans in California and Washington State in 2010-2013. Group identity is deployed as the conceptual framework, and a combination of surveys, fieldwork, and interviews are used to gather the needed data. The central finding is that the Zoroastrian dialect is disappearing as they try to assimilate into American society. The new environment in the United States offers the youth more choices that compete with community-sponsored activities. The Zoroastrian community has a unique opportunity to identify its core beliefs based on the Gatha and accept new members.

INTRODUCTION

Zoroastrians are the followers of Zoroaster, who lived about 3755 years ago. His birth place and burial location are not known. Many believe that he was born somewhere close to the northeastern region of today's Iran. Information about his life is sketchy. As a consequence, his ideas have become the focal point for understanding Zoroastrianism. Zoroaster promoted (1) believing in an essentially good, wise, and holy creator that upholds justice, called Mazda Ahura (دانا هستی بخش بزرگ دانا Wise One Life-Giving); (2) living life according to the principles of Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds;¹ (3) having the freedom to choose our own paths in life; and (4) respecting and protecting water, earth, air, and fire; the elements that make life possible.

This research extends the work of John R. Hinnells² by presenting a snapshot of the Zoroastrian Iranian-Americans in California and Washington State. The stories of these individuals show the challenges of living in a multicultural and democratic society of America that is different from living in Iran. Individual voices from this community reveal the challenges they had faced since leaving Iran in 1979 when an Islamic theocracy replaced the monarchy. By focusing on personal stories, a complex picture emerges that shows the varied religious beliefs among these Zoroastrians and their concerns and hopes about their future.

The main research questions that ground this study are: (1) What is happening to the Zoroastrian spoken language of Dari? (2) What does it mean to be a Zoroastrian? (3) What are the challenges facing the community in the United States? Answering these questions would allow us to understand the tensions in the Zoroastrian community and the challenges

that they face in adapting to the American multicultural society.

After the establishment of an Islamic theocracy in Iran in 1979, many Zoroastrians and other religious minorities have continued to leave Iran. Many of those people have been helped by The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to resettle in America. When the new Zoroastrian immigrants arrive, they are connected with their sponsors. They are given three to six months of financial support by the U.S. government to adjust to a new way of life in America. They attend English language classes and juggle work, school, and family. The older generation needs more support in becoming independent, and they often rely on their younger family members for support. The top concerns for many new immigrants tend to be mastering the English language, getting a driver's license, finding a job, and dealing with memories of the life left behind. The younger members adjust well through socialization at schools and learning the language quickly.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, METHODS, AND DATA SOURCES

According to Amy Gutmann, "Freedom of association is necessary to create and maintain intimate relationships of love and friendship, which are valuable for their own sake, as well as for the pleasures that they offer."³ She argues that nationality, religion, ethnicity are among the "social markers of group identity in that they carry social expectations about how a person of the particular group is expected to think, act, or even appear."⁴ Based on the idea of freedom of association in a liberal democracy, religious or secular institutions attract members that have certain qualities. In Iran, Zoroastrians and other religious minorities tend to be insular, because they are banned from advertising their religions and cannot admit converts into their communities. This means that in Iran if a Muslim-born individual goes to a Zoroastrian Fire Temple/Dar-e Mehr (در مهر) and asks a Zoroastrian priest to perform the necessary rituals for admitting him or her into the Zoroastrian community, the priest cannot legally perform the necessary rituals in public and has to turn that person away. Conducting such rituals attract government sanctions on the entire community and causes harm to individual members. On the other hand, conversion to Islam from other faiths is encouraged and rewarded by financial incentives and other social recognitions that include advertisements in the local papers, public celebrations, and others. The recent case of a 21-year-old Norwegian woman who converted to Islam is an example of this phenomenon.⁵

Consequently, a false perception has been formed in the general population and among many Zoroastrians that Zoroastrians do not admit others into their faith. Today, Zoroastrians in the United States do not have those restrictions that they faced in Iran, and the community has started to accept new members. However, some traditionalists are not comfortable with Zoroastrians marrying non-Zoroastrians, especially those who come from an Islamic background. A documentary film called “*Crisis in Faith: Zoroastrians Today*” written and directed by Tenaz H. Dubash documents the conversion into Zoroastrianism and highlights this tension that exists in the Zoroastrian community today.⁶

Given the semi-structured nature of the one-on-one interviews used in this study, Sharan Merriam’s qualitative approach was used to keep the conversation flexible.⁷ This method allowed the participants to add new information and elaborate as needed. The grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss was deployed for data analysis.⁸ This methodology was particularly useful in identifying certain ideas that were repeated by the participants that could be generalized to the community, given their common experiences. These participants were chosen based on accessibility, personal referral, and the short window of opportunity to record their ideas. In addition, their selection was guided by the desire to capture the voices of the influential community leaders as well as ordinary Zoroastrians. This approach has exposed the concerns of a diverse cross-section of the community and has documented ideas that would have been lost if the focus was only on a particular group.

Data gathered for this research came from initial questionnaires that were completed by fifty-nine participants and subsequent twenty-nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with Zoroastrians in California and Washington in 2010-2013. These one-on-one interviews were conducted at their homes, over the phone, and at various Zoroastrian gatherings. The primary purpose of the initial questionnaire was to get acquainted with the subjects and learn some basic information about their use of Dari, a spoken language used by the Zoroastrians that is different from the official language of Afghanistan known by the same name. Information was also gathered on their length of stay in the United States, level of education, and their willingness to participate in the follow-up in-depth interviews. The follow-up interviews that lasted one to two hours were conducted in Persian or English, depending on the comfort level of the participants and were audio recorded for accurate transcription. Next, the findings based on the surveys and semi-structured interviews are

discussed.

INITIAL FINDINGS

The result of the initial survey completed by fifty-nine Zoroastrians (Appendix A) showed that about 80 percent of them had college or university degrees. Almost half of those who understood the Zoroastrian dialect of Dari could speak it fluently. Also, 42.4 percent of Zoroastrians in this study could not speak Dari. Of those forty-six families with children, 69.6 percent of the children did not understand Dari and 78.3 percent of them could not speak it. If the parents did not know the language, their children did not know the language either. Only about 10 percent of the respondents indicated that Dari was the dominant language spoken at their homes. Persian or Persianglish (a combination of Persian and English) were the dominant languages spoken in their homes. When children spoke with each other, they spoke in English. Tables 1 and 2 show the early signs of language disappearance, as fewer Zoroastrians can speak Dari and teach it to their children. This trend was later confirmed during the in-depth interviews.

Table 1 Zoroastrians in this study who can speak and understand Dari

N=59		N=59	
Speaks Dari fluently	30.5%	Understands Dari well	59.3%
Speaks some Dari	27.1%	Understands some Dari	33.9%
Cannot Speak Dari	42.4%	Does not understand Dari	6.8%

Table 2 Children that understand and can speak Dari, as reported by their parents

N=46		N=46	
Can your children understand Dari?		Can your children speak Dari?	
No	69.6%	No	78.3%
Yes	28.3%	Yes	21.7%
Some	2.2%		

As the community ages and resettles outside of Iran, it is reasonable to predict that fewer Zoroastrians will be able to understand and speak fluently the Zoroastrian dialect if nothing is changed. I have seen this trend in my own family, where my mother and father were fluent in Dari and communicated with each other in this language. When my mother was alive, I asked her why she did not speak *Dari* to her children. She told me that in 1925 when she came to Tehran from Yazd, she did not know Persian and had a difficult time communicating with the local shopkeepers when she wanted to buy milk, eggs, bread, and so on. She did not want her children to experience those difficulties, and that was the reason she spoke to us in Persian. Consequently, none of her six children learned to speak Dari

fluently. Also, none of the ten grandchildren living in the United States understands Dari and only three of them can roughly speak Persian. This trend, if continued without intervention, shows the slow disappearance of the Zoroastrian dialect in the United States.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A ZOROASTRIAN

There was a wide range of interpretations among these participants on what it meant to them to be a Zoroastrian. However, they all mentioned that (1) Zoroastrianism gave them the right to make their own decisions, (2) Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds constituted the core of their beliefs, and (3) protecting the elements of water, air, earth, and fire were important.

I was surprised to find such a wide range of viewpoints on their self-declared Zoroastrian identities. The viewpoints ranged from feeling a duty to preserve the Zoroastrian religion to having weak or no attachment to Zoroastrianism. For some of the participants like Shida (شیدا), 62, being born into a Zoroastrian family was a source of pride. She believed that her ancestors had preserved the faith under very difficult circumstances, and now it was her turn to safeguard those values and pass them on to the future generations. She recalled a story that her father had told her when she was a child, and it was from his youth. “When he used to pass through a neighborhood in the city of Kerman,” Shida said, “...he would be harassed by Muslims who threw rocks at him and told him to get lost.”⁹ Another story repeated by several people in this study was about the local Muslims not allowing the Zoroastrians to live inside the protective city walls of Kerman because they were considered “unclean” by the Muslim residents of Kerman, during the Safavid period. As a consequence, when the city came under attack in 1722 during the Mahmood Afghan’s raid on the weakened Safavid dynasty, many were raped and killed. The story circulating in the community claims that many Zoroastrian girls and women committed suicide by throwing themselves into the wells.¹⁰ A travel diary written by Haaj Sayaah about 166 years ago, during the reigns of Naser al-Din Shah and Ahmad Shah Qajar, tells similar stories that show discriminations experienced by the Zoroastrians of Yazd. In his travel diary, Mohamad Ali Sayaah Mahalaati writes about the Zoroastrians he met in Yazd. He writes: “In Yazd and the surrounding area, many Zoroastrians live there. They are hard-working, honest, harmless, and noble people. However, they live in the worst conditions. In the city, they are forbidden from riding, and in the desert, even if they are riding, they must dismount and hold their two hands to their chests (a sign of submission and respect) if they meet a

Muslim on the way.”¹¹

The Arab invasion of Iran about 1400 years ago, led to the collapse of the Sassanid dynasty in 651. Consequently, Zoroastrian religion and traditions came under sustained attacks that nearly wiped them out. Fire temples were either demolished or converted to mosques, and most Zoroastrian religious books were destroyed too. To understand the level of destruction inflicted upon the Zoroastrians of Iran, one can recall the destruction of the Buddhist statues in Afghanistan by Taliban in March 2001¹² or the destruction of the ancient world heritage sites of Timbuktu in July 2012, by the Islamists¹³ whose aims included erasing the past by destroying non-Islamic cultural and religious sites. Another modern-day example of this form of religiously motivated terrorism by Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL)¹⁴ can be seen in Iraq and Syria. According to Jalil Doostkhaah, compared to the 345000 words Avesta (اوستا) that existed during the Sassanid period, today’s Avesta has about 83000 words.¹⁵ This means that about 76 percent of the Zoroastrian texts have been destroyed over the past 1400.

The campaign to erase the non-Islamic past of Iran has become routine in modern Iranian politics, and the Islamic clergy in Iran is worried about mass conversion to Zoroastrianism by young Iranians.¹⁶ For example, BBC Persian reported that in July 2011, in the city of Mashad (مشهد) 5000 square meters of wall paintings that depicted stories from Shahnameh (The Book of Kings شاهنامه) were erased overnight by painting over them.¹⁷ Conforming public spaces to Islamic values has come to mean the removal of all statues and art displays that show the pre-Islamic glory of Iran. An Iranian sociologist, Majid Mohammadi, writes about the disappearance of various statues around Iranian cities. In the city of Saari (ساری) at a public square that was renamed to Meydaan-e Imam (میدان امام), life-size bronze chariots from the Achaemenid and Ashkani periods were removed under the justification that these un-Islamic displays had nothing to do with “Imam.”¹⁸ These and other nationalistic symbols are viewed as contradictory to Islamic values and in direct competition with Islamization of Iran and the power of the religious leaders.

During the Islamic dominance of Iran, Zoroastrian priests and scholars lost their prominence in their communities, and many were killed or had to flee to save their lives.¹⁹ Additionally, the conquered people of Iran who converted to Islam had to pay the Islamic

taxes of Khoms and Zakat (خمس و نکات) and those non-Muslims who were allowed to practice their religions had to pay a special religious tax called Jazyeh (جزیه). The net effect was that in times of peace and war, steady streams of income were coming to the coffers of the rulers. These and other stories symbolized survival in a hostile environment that gave people like Shida, a sense of pride and an obligation to preserve and pass on the Zoroastrian values to the future generation.

Almost everyone in this study mentioned Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds as the guiding principles for living a good life. Aarmaan (آرمان), 49, viewed these three ideas as the most comprehensive profound teachings of Zoroaster. These concepts meant to him that a person should first consult with his or her clear mind, then examine the ideas thoroughly by talking with others and finally, choose the best course of action for solving the problem.²⁰ Aarash (آرش), 26, argued that being born a Zoroastrian was the “easy part,” and the real difficulty was living up to the three principles of Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds. He mentioned wars and environmental pollutions caused by human activities were examples of abuse of the four sacred elements of water, earth, air, and fire. For this newly arrived immigrant, Zoroaster was one of the people that he admired and tried to use his teachings in his life by writing a selected verse on a piece of paper, each day of the week. Aarash said, “Today, I am going to live my life according to this quote.”²¹ For him, the Zoroaster’s Gatha was the real source of his religious belief.

Mahsheed’s (مهشید) Zoroastrian identity was influenced by being born into a Zoroastrian family, and she liked the portions of the Gatha that she had studied. However, her identity transcended Zoroastrianism, and she saw herself as “a lover of spirituality” and believed that Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and others were good people too. What was important to her was making “heart to heart connections with others,” and ultimately what mattered to Mahsheed was being a trustworthy human being, and “being good for the sake of goodness.” In Mahsheed’s view, “Everybody else is good too.”²²

A similar viewpoint was expressed by Shahriar (شهریار), 47, who argued that he had “moved beyond the tribalism.” He saw himself as part of a larger spiritual community that included Jews, Christians, and others. He said, “I have friends who are non-Zoroastrians, and they are more Zoroastrian than many Zoroastrians I know. And I rather have them in my

community than the tribe I was born into.” For Shahriar, being a Zoroastrian meant “being honest with myself, committed to the truth, and have the courage to speak the truth.”²³

Rostam, 50, was “extremely proud to be a Zoroastrian” because he believed that Zoroaster’s ideas continued to be relevant today, and had “the smell of freedom, encouraging you to think. Zoroaster did not perform any miracles or things like that.” Rostam was also impressed by the way Zoroaster introduced his ideas to others by giving people choices and asking them to think with a clear mind before deciding. He believed that many people recognized Zoroaster’s teachings as a “philosophy” and not so much of a “religion.”²⁴

Goshtasb (گشتاسب), 54, who claimed to know the fundamentals of Zoroaster’s teachings, wanted to see a clear list of the ideas that Zoroastrianism stood for. He argued, even those Zoroastrians that were considered to be scholars and most learned people in the faith could not tell the community with 100 percent certainty all that Zoroastrianism stood for. According to Goshtasb, as the community has become better educated, progressed, and modernized, Zoroastrians were digging deeper into the meaning of Zoroastrianism. Certain accepted concepts were under review and questioned, while new definitions were emerging. He argued that today, many believed the true message of Zoroaster was in the Gatha (Zoroaster’s Songs) and not in the collection of various prayers known as Khordeh Avestaa (خرده آوستا) because the latter contained a variety of literature that their sources and messages were questionable. He said, “We have changed the meaning of our religion!” Therefore, as an important first step, “we should define our religion” and rewrite it by identifying the rituals and activities that are an essential part of the religion and distinguishing them from the rituals that are objectionable to a thinking person today. He wanted to know if Zoroastrians really “believed in God or not” and what was the true nature of that God. He believed that by having a clear set of principles, the community would be more united and clear about its own religious identity, especially when some people in and out of the community referred to Zoroaster as a “philosopher” and not a “prophet” in a religious sense.²⁵

Afsheen (افشین), 39, viewed himself as a member of the Zoroastrian community and considered Zoroaster to be a wise person whose teachings were useful to all humans, and

encouraged people to help each other. His connection to the community was more “social and cultural,” and not so much “religious.” In fact, for Afsheen and many others in this study, putting emphasis on certain religious rituals, like praying five times a day or performing certain rituals like washing hands or wearing a cap before entering the fire temple, were seen as missed opportunities to really highlight the more important ideas of the freedom of choice, equality of men and women, and independent decision making that Zoroaster promoted.²⁶

Shekoofeh (شکوفه), 60, believed that Zoroaster’s teachings gave her the right to make her own decisions. She also believed in the power of prayers and claimed, “By reciting the short prayers of Ashem Vohoo²⁷ and Yataa Ahoo a few times, my problems get solved. It really solved them!” She believed, “The religion of Zoroaster tells us the truth, shows us the right path and how to live our lives. But we may not always be able to follow the right path because of life’s circumstances.”²⁸

Abtin (آبتین), 82, who had changed his name from Abbas (عباس), believed that his new name represented his Iranian and Zoroastrian identity and he did not want to be associated with “the religion of the Arabs.” He encouraged other Iranians to “at least choose a name that was based on their Iranian identity” if they were not going to change their religion too.²⁹ Abtin had studied the Gatha in order to understand Zoroaster’s message. He had concluded that Yasht-haa (یشت ها) and Vandidaad (وندیداد) were not in agreement with Zoroaster’s message. Yasht-haa (plural of *Yasht*) are prayers and worships dedicated to AhuraMazda, Amshaaspandaan (امشاسپندان), and Eezadaan (ایزدان). Amshaaspandaan are the “Holy Immortals” (جاودانان پاک) that signify AhuraMazda’s attributes and Eezadaan are the plural form of Eezad (ایزد), helpers and guardians of various elements and concepts like water, air, fire, justice, and others, which means worthy of worship.

In the Zoroastrian literature, for everything good and useful, an Eezad (ایزد) is recognized and respected. The names of these Eezadaan are reflected in the Zoroastrian and Iranian calendars. Vandidaad means “Laws against Evil” (قانون ضد دیو) and this book has 22 chapters that deal with creation stories, health and sickness of the world, keeping promises, hygiene and so forth. These stories are not read during religious ceremonies. According to Jahaangeer Oshidari, Iranians used to gather and read the *Vandidaad* stories as a cover to

hide their true intention, which was finding solutions to rid themselves of their foreign occupiers.³⁰ These works of literature are valuable because they provide a window into the past and form part of the old Zoroastrian and Iranian literature that survived repeated destruction.

Abtin said, “I see myself as a Zoroastrian who follows the Gatha to the best of my ability.” For him, this meant believing in AhuraMazda, who “created life and established life based on wisdom.”³¹ In Abtin’s view, in Zoroastrianism, humans are free to choose their paths in life and establish laws to govern themselves. There is also a separation of religion and politics as evidenced in the famous Yataa Ahoo³² prayer (نیایش یاتا اهو) that specifically distinguishes between the concepts of Ratoo (رتو), the religious leader; and Ahoo (اهو), the social/political leader. He argued that because Zoroaster asked AhuraMazda many questions and did not record any of the answers, or if he did, we simply do not have any records of them today, in the absence of such answers, “sciences and progress of knowledge will answer those questions in the future.” Abtin was referring to Oshtavad Gaah (اشتود گاه), Haat 44 (هات ۴۴) that contains thirty-six questions that Zoroaster asks AhuraMazda. These questions are about a variety of topics that include how the universe works, Zoroaster questioning his own assumptions, and social justice questions like the fair punishment for a person who cheats a worker out of his or her rightful salary for the work performed. Since there are no definite answers provided, it is assumed that people need to work together to find solutions to their problems.³³

CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Zoroastrians made up a small portion of the people who left Iran after the 1979 Iranian revolution. Like many others who left Iran and came to the United States, they could not imagine that they would not return to their ancestral homeland. The anticipation that the Iranian theocracy would collapse soon never materialized, and the hope of returning to Iran was replaced by plans for a permanent stay in the United States. Their children needed to go to school, and their savings could not sustain them indefinitely. Zoroastrians were granted religious asylum in the United States, and they could work as they maintained a hopeful outlook that the political situation would eventually change in Iran, and they could return to the society they once knew well. The 2012-2013 Zoroastrian Telephone Directory lists about 1,170 Zoroastrian families living in the United States that registered with the California Zoroastrian Center (CZC). There

are no available data to show how many Zoroastrian families have not registered with the CZC. This voluntary association based on specific social markers shows a clear desire by the community to declare its presence and attract new eligible members.

Shida Farhangi explained how she joined a Zoroastrian group in California when she first arrived there in the late 1970s. She explained that this group was led by the late Baanoo Frangis Shahrokh (روانشاد بانو فرنگیس شاهرخ) and met in private homes. “Eventually an organization was formed and registered in 1980, as the California Zoroastrian Center. Board elections were held, and from then on, I continued to serve for about 25-26 years.” She also taught Persian classes for the youth.³⁴ It was through the efforts and generosity of the community members that the current building was built to serve the community’s social and religious needs.

Ardeshir Anoushiravani (اردشیر انوشیروانی), 65, explained the opposition the Zoroastrian community encountered when the building to house the CZC was completed.

There was a church on the corner that the clergy had seen the column, the design of the double-headed bull that deals with our tradition, and had said, well, there are a bunch of Satan worshippers that are daring enough to put a goat’s head on the top of a column in front of their temple right in front of us. So, there were some ill sentiments that were stirred up against our Dar-e Mehr (Gate of Love/Friendship) that we were Satan worshippers.

So, a few weeks after the opening ceremony, there was shooting from a car that broke the front glass of Dar-e Mehr, and it needed to be replaced. This was a sandblasted Faravahar that we had put in front of the door that was shot at. There were three bullets that hit it, and we had to replace the glass. It was reported to the police, and that was the end of it. This happened in 1986. Because of that shooting, Dr. Jafari put a brief history of Zartoshti religion together, explaining the religion, the columns that it was a bull and not a goat, and it had historical, sentimental value to us. The priest retracted his statements and said these people are not Satan worshippers.”³⁵

This example goes with the sentiments expressed by Mahnaz (مهناز), 45, and others interviewed in this study that “Here, they [Americans] don’t know our religion.” Because of the absence of active recruitment programs for converting others to Zoroastrianism, the community was not growing as fast as it could. Mahnaz and others felt that even the current programs and facilities were not adequate in meeting the growing cultural needs of the

existing community. She believed that “due to our low numbers, not being open-minded, and being a closed society,” the community was hurting itself.³⁶

Alayar, 67, said, “In Iran, we are a minority population of between 20,000 to 40,000 people. That’s all that’s left!” He said that about 100 Zoroastrians were coming to the United States as immigrants and the community was not able to “help them the way we are supposed to.” Lack of a comprehensive census data for the Zoroastrian community has meant not knowing where Zoroastrians live in the United States and around the world. He wanted to see “better media system to spread the word around and provide information to others about Zoroastrian people, culture, values, employment opportunities, places of getting together, and help the newcomers feel at home.” He was hopeful that the Zoroastrians living in the United States could “accomplish” their goals because of the freedom and the many educational and entrepreneurial opportunities that were open to them.³⁷ Afsheen (افشین) viewed the scattered Zoroastrians around the world as “Zoroastrian ambassadors” that could spread the message of Zoroaster to different corners of the globe. He also expressed a common concern that in a generation or two, those living in the United States and other countries could see the disappearance of the Zoroastrian spoken language and religious traditions.³⁸

Maaziyaar (مازیار) believed that the Zoroastrian community needed to “carefully analyze its beliefs and existing rituals” and understand the meaning behind the important ceremonies like Sedre Pooshi (سدره پوشی) (initiation ceremony conducted by Zoroastrian priests). He argued that the community needed to consider the old and the new generations that lived in and out of Iran. He also viewed Iranians to be more flexible in “accepting new ideas and new converts” than the Parsees (پارسیان هند Zoroastrians from India). He believed that it was very important to support the Zoroastrians that lived in Iran “by creating work for them, such as making Sedreh and Koshti (سدره و کشتی).” Sedreh is a thin white undershirt, and Koshti is a thin white belt worn over Sedreh made of sheep’s wool that Zoroastrians wear under their clothes. He also argued that the Zoroastrians remaining in Iran needed to be encouraged to stay there so that their homes and lands could not be confiscated by the Muslims. In other words, he was worried that if Iran “emptied of its Zoroastrian population,” then Islamic hegemony would erase the remaining traces of Zoroastrianism in Iran, the Zoroaster’s birth place. As for the Zoroastrians living in the United States and

outside of Iran, he argued that the old generation needed to better communicate with its youth by “using a language that they can relate to and help them choose their paths in life.”³⁹

Jahaangeer (جهانگیر), 40, felt helpless in watching his children “dissolve” into the larger society. He felt that driving one and a half hours each way, “assuming there was no traffic,” to get to the California Zoroastrian Center so that his children could socialize with other Zoroastrian children and take classes there, was not practical. He and several others talked about the important role sports could play in bringing the Zoroastrian youth together.⁴⁰

On the topic of propagating Zoroaster’s message by keeping the doors open to others who wanted to become Zoroastrians, Maaziyaar, who was a convert himself, argued, “If Zoroaster believed in keeping his religion exclusively and did not allow others to join, then the Zoroastrian population would have consisted of only Zoroaster and his immediate family.”⁴¹ This was a sentiment expressed by a significant number of people in this study. Because Zoroaster was born in Iran, Iranian nationalists and those turned off by the Islamic theocracy in Iran are attracted to his name and ideas. We do not know much about Zoroaster or his life. Among the survived Zoroastrian literature are few of his songs and they have become the main source for understanding his message.

The people in this study believed that the new converts knew about the Zoroaster’s teachings better than many who were born into Zoroastrian families because these new converts had studied the Gatha and were choosing to follow Zoroaster’s teachings voluntarily. Abtin claimed that there were “2.6 million Zoroastrians who have joined the faith.” Thus, arguing that there was a need to have an organization that welcomed these new converts and mentored them.⁴² Ardeshir argued that the new converts were giving the community hope that they were growing and “millions” of people were discovering Zoroaster’s message and were connecting to it. Aarmaan (آرمان) argued that in Zoroastrianism, “there are no holy places. Earth is the only holy land. There are no talks about race, no chosen people. This is the most environmentally friendly vision that I have seen.” He further argued that when people learned about Zoroaster’s message, they would “naturally” be attracted to his ideas because Zoroaster’s ideas were congruent with reason

and they did not require a “blind leap of faith.”⁴³

The opponents of the “open door” concept that welcomed new converts argued that when a Zoroastrian married a non-Zoroastrian, the community became weaker because it showed that Zoroastrians were “dissolving” into the larger society. They also did not fully trust the new converts and were not sure about their “real motives” for wanting to join the Zoroastrian community. The people in this study took pride in declaring that their sons or daughters married other Zoroastrians and expressed strong regrets if they married non-Zoroastrians. Afsheen (افشین) explained that for social and cultural reasons, many Zoroastrians were more comfortable with others like them who shared their cultural roots. Many centuries of attacks and isolation had resulted in a segment of the community feeling “uncomfortable” relating to or accepting new converts in their midst. Clearly, this is an issue that is not going away anytime soon and requires more dialogue as more Zoroastrians marry others with different faiths.

It is common to find Zoroastrians change their names to “fit in” the American society and save themselves the agony of hearing their names mispronounced, repeatedly, by others. For example, Behrooz became Bob, Jamsheed became Jim, Shahnaz became Nauz or Nauzi, Mehrdaad became Merdad, Jahaangeer became John, Khodaamoraad became Morad, and so on; and the last names were shortened too for easier pronunciation by others. Once the immediate concerns of getting a driver’s license, learning English, getting a job, sending children to school, “going through the hurdles of becoming a citizen,”⁴⁴ and making enough money to pay rent or mortgage were taken care of, the feeling of isolation and the need to preserve the culture became more real. Zoroastrian singles have a difficult time finding other Zoroastrians to marry. Attending the monthly festivals or religious functions are not enough to solve the “singles problem.” There were many Zoroastrians who felt isolated and missed interacting with others who shared their values. Shekeefeh said, “In the United States, where we live, we are isolated and away from other Zoroastrians.” She also felt that those Iranians who had lived in the United States “for a long time, they seemed too Americanized and acted differently, talked differently...and many of them showed off (پز زیاد) (میدن) too much!”⁴⁵

A different sentiment was expressed by those who had lived in the United States for

20-30 years or so. According to these “first immigrants,” many of the “newly arrived” immigrants lacked self-reliance, seemed confused about what they wanted to do, and expected more support from others for things that they could do themselves. The established members saw some of the newcomers as exhibiting some poor traits (زرنگ بازی) of trying to outsmart the system. They attributed these behaviors to living under the Islamic theocracy and difficult economic conditions in Iran. Examples that were mentioned included expecting others to pay for their fees, acting cheap, or having unrealistic expectations of others to solve their problems. In the views of the more established Zoroastrians, the newcomers had more support than they had when they arrived in the United States some 30 years ago. They did not have anyone to guide them, and they learned by trial and error.

DISCUSSION

When societal changes are too drastic, traditional norms breakdown, change and may disappear. As technology and media continue to transform our world, we are witnessing the loss of one language every 14 days.⁴⁶ Leaving behind the familiar and coming to a new country to start a new life is a major turning point for families and individuals. The multicultural nature of the United States has convinced the Zoroastrians that they are “dissolving” into the greater society because they see their members marry non-Zoroastrians and many do not attend cultural and religious programs. As evidenced by this study, the number of speakers of the Zoroastrian dialect of Dari has declined, and fewer people can speak and understand Dari today. A similar trend is observed with regard to understanding and speaking the Persian language among those Zoroastrians who were born in the United States or moved to this country when they were very young. Most of the second-generation Zoroastrians do not know how to read, write, or speak Persian. This trend should serve as an early warning for the Zoroastrian community to learn from the educational efforts and strategies of others. For example, the Native Americans of Washington State have set up curriculum materials about their culture with video clips that teach the old tribal languages. The project “From the Time Immemorial” is a superb example of what can be done to keep a spoken language alive.⁴⁷

This study found that many Zoroastrians had not read the Zoroaster’s Gatha and did not consider themselves to be really “religious” per se. Most of them prayed occasionally or not at all. Most of them attended the Zoroastrian events to socialize and meet their friends. Some of them referred to Zoroaster as a “prophet,” and others referred to him as a

“philosopher” or both. There were also those who wanted a clarification of the Zoroastrian core beliefs. They wanted the removal of the “boring” and “irrelevant” rituals (i.e., long prayer rituals in a language that they did not understand) that discouraged them and their children from attending Zoroastrian community functions.

In the free market place of ideas in the United States, the Zoroastrian community has serious competition. Zoroastrians of Iran and India are coming to America from societies that were insular and socially imposed traditions that barred them from allowing others to join their religion. However, America is a different place and the times have changed.

If the Zoroastrian community is going to survive and grow, it needs to identify its core beliefs and provide useful social and cultural incentives for all its registered and non-registered members to feel welcome. The participants in this study, who live in the social media world of today, are demanding to know the meaning behind the religious rituals and cultural activities that are claimed to be a part of Zoroastrianism. If the youth of today are expected to lead the community, they need to feel connected, listened to, and challenged by activities that stimulate their higher-order thinking and gets them involved in the decisions affecting them. The age and content-appropriate activities need to appeal to them and include the essentials of Zoroastrianism.

The Zoroastrian community needs to capitalize on the enormous goodwill from the Muslim-born Iranians who continue to ask, “How can I become a Zoroastrian?” The community needs to speak with a clear affirmative voice and have initiation programs to welcome these informed individuals into its fold, or at the least, provide resources and support for them. We are seeing more contemporary Iranian poets like Mehdi Akhavaan Saales⁴⁸ and Fereidoon Moshiri⁴⁹ use Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds in their writings as a way of highlighting an idealized pre-Islamic golden era of the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great when reason, respect for human rights, and tolerance were valued. Prejudices that have been formed in the Zoroastrian community, due to the painful historical experiences in Iran and strict government censorships and controls that prevented conversion into Zoroastrianism, must be abandoned in favor of an informed education for all who want to learn about Zoroaster and his message. Ultimately, the community needs to accept those who have chosen the Zoroaster’s path and want to join the larger Zoroastrian

community. Being spread all around the United States has meant that smaller Zoroastrian communities do not have the necessary financial means to set up a place of worship of their own or a permanent cultural center for their smaller congregations. Driving long distances to attend social and religious functions is not feasible for many families. Perhaps investing in the technology that would allow virtual online and interactive connections to happen is one solution that the community could explore.

There are creative solutions that have been tried to keep the youth involved with the community and strengthen their friendships with each other. There were various levels of success with organizing sporting events, chess competitions, poetry reading, choir, dancing lessons, computer classes, and other social activities. Bringing the Zoroastrians from India and Iran together in the United States and bridging their cultural differences is another challenge that the community needs to examine, and this research did not address it. Another future project could be identifying exemplars of effective practices that have brought the community members closer together and increased their numbers. There are Zoroastrian communities in Iran, India, United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and other countries that can participate in such a study.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided a snapshot of the main challenges that the Zoroastrian Iranian Americans are facing today as they integrate into the larger society. They come from a country that did not allow them to accept converts into their community, to a place where religious recruitment is the norm. One of the main challenges has been the need to fit in and have a productive life while maintaining their Zoroastrian identity in a multicultural society. The surveys reveal that the Zoroastrian spoken language has been the first casualty of the assimilation into the American culture. Given the long distances that families with children need to travel to meet other Zoroastrians, many individuals and families are feeling isolated and helpless as their children grow up in an environment that does not support their cultural norms, including Dari.

Leaving the Islamic theocracy of Iran behind and living in a free society has provided the Zoroastrians with a unique opportunity to examine their core religious beliefs and cultural practices. There exists a wide range of interpretations as to what it means to be a Zoroastrian among the people interviewed in this study. Some believed that because of the

extraordinary hardships experienced by their ancestors, they had an obligation to preserve the Zoroastrian culture and pass it on to their children. Others expressed a lack of interest in Zoroastrianism and considered it just another religion like so many others that are found in the United States. However, they all agree that Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds are worthy ideals to follow, and protecting the four elements of water, air, earth, and fire are important. Many in this study wanted a thoughtful clarification of the core beliefs of Zoroastrianism and meaningful opportunities for their children to meet other Zoroastrians. The feeling of being gradually dissolving into the larger society was a common fear that most of them expressed.

To reverse the pattern of language loss, the Zoroastrians can learn from the Native Americans of Washington State. They have created oral history records that include short videos, showing the elders speaking the rare tribal languages while telling folktales or explaining a particular tradition. Using technology to allow people to participate virtually in cultural activities via the internet can be one solution for Zoroastrians not to feel isolated. Frankly, there are no easy solutions, and additional studies are needed to identify new and effective practices that have been successful in preserving endangered cultures.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The sequence of these concepts is important. Thinking must be first, followed by (words) discussion, and then (deeds) action.
- ² Hinnells, John R., *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
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- ⁴ Gutmann, Amy. "Identity in Democracy." 9. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- ⁵ Janjaal-e Mosalmaan Shodan-e Dokhtar-e Maseehi-ye Norweji Tasaaveer. *Fars News Agency*. Retrieved from farsnews.com website: January 18, 2016, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13941027001269>
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- ⁸ Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1999.
- ⁹ Shida interviewed by the author, July 5, 2010, interview 148A, transcript.
- ¹⁰ This was a group conversation and the topic of the Zoroastrian massacre at the city of Kerman came up. They did not want to be identified for fear of retaliation against their family members in Iran.
- ¹¹ Sayaah, Haaj. Khaateraate-e Haaj Sayaah, yaa doreye khof va vahshat (2nd ed.). p. 179. Tehran: chaapkhaaneh Sepehr - Moaseseye Enteshaaraat-e Amir Kabeer. 2536 Shahanshaahi.
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- ¹³ Ahmed, Amir. "Mali Islamists Destroy Tombs in Timbuktu." *CNN*, no. Friday, October 19, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/18/world/africa/mali-shrines>.
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- ¹⁵ Doost-khaah, Jalil, ed. *Avestaa: Kohantareen Sorood-Haa Va Matn-Haaye Irani*. Edited by Jalil Doost-khaah. 2 vols. Vol. 1. Tehran: Enteshaaraat-e Morvaareed, 1375 H. S., 15.
- ¹⁶ "Iranians Converting out of Islam Infuriates Islamic Clergy." (2008), <http://aryamehr11.blogspot.com/2008/06/iranians-converting-out-of-islam.html>.
- ¹⁷ "محو شبانه چند هزار متر مربع نقاشی دیواری شاهنامه در مشهد" *BBC Persian* (July 7, 2011).
- ¹⁸ Mohammadi, Majid. "اسلامگرایان به جنگ سربازان هخامنشی و اشکانی می روند" (13 July 2011), http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f3_islamists_against_statues/24263157.html.
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- ²⁰ Aarmaan interviewed by the author, July 7, 2010, interview 152A, Transcript.
- ²¹ Aarash interviewed by the author, July 4, 2010, interview 158A, Transcript.
- ²² Mahsheed interviewed by the author, June 28, 2010, interview 143A, Transcript.
- ²³ Shahriyar interviewed by the author, July 3, 2010, interview 156A, Transcript.
- ²⁴ Rostam interviewed by the author, July 6, 2010, interview 166A, Transcript.
- ²⁵ Goshtasb interviewed by the author, June 28, 2010, interview 144A, Transcript.
- ²⁶ Afsheen interviewed over the phone by the author, June 30, 2013, interview 174A, Transcript.
- ²⁷ This short prayer says, following Asha leads to happiness and happiness is for those who seek the best truth and live their lives accordingly.
- ²⁸ Shekoofeh interviewed by the author, June 30, 2010, interview 149A, Transcript.

- ²⁹ Abtin interviewed by the author, June 27, 2010, interview 140A, Transcript.
- ³⁰ Oshidari, Jahangir. *Daaneshnaameh Mazdayasnaa: Vajheh Naameh Toozeehee Aaeen-E Zartosht*. 1st ed. Tehran: Nashr-e Markaz, 1371 (H. Shamsi).
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² There are several similar translations on this prayer. This prayer is about recognizing the law of righteousness and using the power of good to help the poor and the needy.
- ³³ Doost-khaah, Jalil, ed. *Avestaa: Kohantareen Sorood-Haa Va Matn-Haaye Irani*. Edited by Jalil Doost-khaah. 2 vols. Vol. 1. 44-50. Tehran: Enteshaaraat-e Morvaareed, 1375 H. S.
- ³⁴ Shida interviewed by the author, July 5, 2010, interview 148A, transcript.
- ³⁵ Ardeshir Anoushirvani interviewed by the author, July 5, 2010, interview 146A, transcript.
- ³⁶ Mahnaz interviewed by the author, July 7, 2010, interview 169A, transcript.
- ³⁷ Alayaar interviewed by the author, May 15, 2011, interview 173A, transcript.
- ³⁸ Afsheen interviewed over the phone by the author, June 30, 2013, interview 174A, Transcript.
- ³⁹ Maaziyaar interviewed over the phone by the author, June 27, 2010, interview 140A, Transcript.
- ⁴⁰ Jahaangeer interviewed the author, July 7, 2010, interview 170A, Transcript.
- ⁴¹ Maaziyaar
- ⁴² Abtin
- ⁴³ Aarmaan
- ⁴⁴ Shekoofeh
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Rymer, Russ. *Vanishing Languages*. *National Geographic*. Retrieved from National Geographic website: October 5, 2015 <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/07/vanishing-languages/rymer-text>
- ⁴⁷ Indian Education <http://www.k12.wa.us/IndianEd/Curriculum.aspx>
- ⁴⁸ Akhavaan Saales, Mehdi. *She'r-e Zamaan-e Maa-2 (شعر زمان ما ۲)*. Tehran: Moassesseh-ye Enteshaaraat-e Negaah (موسسه انتشارات نگاه). 1376 H. S.
- ⁴⁹ Moshiri, Fereidoon. *Navaaee Ham-Aahang-e Baaraan نواایی هم آهنگ باران*. Tehran: Nashr-e Cheshmeh نشر چشمه. 1384 H. S.

APPENDIX

Fifty-nine people completed the survey.

- Gender: Male or Female
- Highest level of education completed (HLEC):
- Do you know how to speak Dari (S.D.)? (Fluent) Yes, I speak it very well. (not fluent) Yes,

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but I am not fluent in it. (No) No, I can't speak it.

- Do you understand Dari when others speak (U.D.)? (Yes) Yes, I understand it fully. (some) Yes, I understand some of it. (No) No, I don't understand it.
- Did your parents speak Dari with you at home (PSDH)?
- If you have children, do your children understand Dari (CUD)?
- If you have children, do they speak Dari with you (CSD)
- What's the dominant language spoken at home (DLSH)? (P)Persian/Farsi; (E)English; (D) Dari; (P&E) a mix of Persian and English; (EPD) a mix of English, Persian, and Dari
- How long ago did you leave Iran?

Name	Age	Gender	HLEC	SD	UD	PSDH	CUD	CSD	DLSH	Left Iran
Jane Doe2	-	F	MA	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	-	29 yrs ago
Jane Doe3	-	F	MA chemistry	Some	Yes	No	No	No	Persian	32 yrs ago
Mitra	18	F	High School	No	No	No	N/A	N/A	P&E	Born in the USA
Veesta	19	F	Going to College	No	Some	No	N/A	N/A	P&E	Born in the USA
Babak	20	M	AA	No	Some	Yes	N/A	N/A	Persian	Born in the USA
Bahareh	22	F	AA	Some	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	P&E	Born in the USA
Atriya	23	F	BS	Some	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	EPD	5 yrs ago
Cyrus	27	M	PhD	No	No	No	N/A	N/A	P&E	Born in the USA
Arash	26	M	BA Civil Engineering	No	Some	No	N/A	N/A	Persian	2 months ago
Zubin	29	M	BS	No	No	No	N/A	N/A	English	Born in the USA
Kaveh	30	M	BA, Int'l Business	No	Some	No	N/A	N/A	Persian	10 yrs ago
Rostam	32	M	M.S.	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Dari	5 yrs ago
Parviz	37	M	BA	Some	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	P&E	16 yrs ago
Jane Doe8	37	F	MA	Some	Yes	No	No	No	Persian	9 yrs ago
Niloofer	38	F	MD	No	No	No	N/A	N/A	English	29 yrs ago
Jane Doe5	37	F	High School	No	Some	No	No	No	-	20 yrs ago
Mandana	39	F	BA, Computer Science	No	some	no	No	No	Persian	10 yrs ago
Jane Doe6	40	F	BA Nursing	No	Some	No	No	No	-	17 yrs ago
Farin	40	F	BA Nursing	No	Some	No	No	No	-	17 yrs ago
Behnam	43	M	Technical Training	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Persian	25 yrs ago
Jane Doe7	44	F	BA	No	Some	No	No	No	-	2.5 yrs
Mehrnaz	45	F	BA	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	-	33 yrs ago
Jane Doe1	46	F	BS	Some	Yes	Yes	No	No	P&E	26 yrs ago
Shahriar	47	M	MA	No	Some	No	No	No	Persian	33 yrs ago
Shirin	47	F	BA	No	Yes	No	No	No	Persian	25 yrs ago
Arman	49	M	BA	No	Some	No	Some	No	Persian	36 yrs ago
Kourosh	49	M	BA	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	P&E	29 yrs ago
Mandana	49	F	PhD	No	Some	No	No	No	P&E	37 yrs ago
Khodadad	50	M	PhD	Some	Some	Yes	N/A	N/A	Persian	31 yrs ago

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Behrooz	50	M	BS Computer Sci	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	P&E	31 yrs ago
Rostam	50	M	MA	Some	Yes	No	No	No	P&E	31 yrs ago
Mahshid	50	F	BA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	P&E	32 yrs ago
Shahnaz	51	F	High School	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	P&E	28 yrs ago
Feridoon	53	M	BS	No	Some	No	No	No	Persian	31 yrs ago
Parvaneh	53	F	BA	Some	Some	Yes	Yes	No	-	3 yrs ago
Iraj	54	M	BS	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	P&E	31 yrs ago
Goshtab	54	M	BS	No	Some	No	No	No	English	36 yrs ago
Armittee	55	F	BA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Dari	28 yrs ago
Jane Doe9	55	F	BA	No	Some	Yes	No	No	English	Born in the USA
Gohar	55	F	BA Physics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	10 yrs ago
Jane Doe4	56	F	BA geography	No	Some	No	No	No	-	15 yrs ago
Pari	59	F	High School	No	Yes	No	No	No	P&E	27 yrs ago
Shekoofeh	60	F	H. S. Diploma	Some	Yes	No	No	No	English	42 yrs ago
Farideh	64	F	BA	Some	Yes	No	No	No	-	-
Shida	62	F	MA	Some	Yes	No	No	No	Persian	41 yrs ago
Ardeshir	65	M	MD	Some	Yes	No	No	No	Persian	41 yrs ago
Iraj	67	M	AA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Persian	8 yrs ago
Alayar	67	M	PhD Candidate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Dari	38 yrs ago
Soltoon	67	F	9 th grade	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Dari	27 yrs ago
Perin	68	F		Some	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	EPD	27 yrs ago
Goshtasb	72	M	MD	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	EPD	5 yrs ago
Mahin	73	F	9 th grade	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Persian	11 yrs ago
Daryoush	73	M	6 th grade	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Dari	15 yrs ago
Sohrab	74	M	H. S. Diploma	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Dari	30 yrs ago
Abtin	82	M	PhD in Law	Some	Some	No	No	No	Persian	32 yrs ago
Afshin	39	M	PhD in Computer	No	Yes	No	No	No	Persian	12 yrs ago
Banoo	80	F	6 th grade	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	31 yrs ago
Irاندokht	81	F	-	Some	Yes	Yes	No	No	Persian	27 yrs ago