



Contemporary Zoroastrians Between Integration and Misunderstandings

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Abstract. – The article shares the findings based on participant observation conducted during the 11th World Zoroastrian Congress as well as on the analysis of other resources linked to contemporary Zoroastrians. Paying attention to the internal differentiation of the Zoroastrian world community, it focuses on the components that stand in the way to its integration, as disagreements that refer to customs, religion, or the matter of who the “real” Zoroastrians are. It also discusses the boundaries between those who believe to be Zoroastrians from generations and the outside world, as well as the ways these boundaries eventually can be crossed through conversion or intermarriages. [*Zoroastrians, Parsis, contemporary Zoroastrian communities, religious minorities, ethnoreligious groups*]

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Introduction

Every few years, followers of Zoroastrianism – perceived to be the oldest monotheistic religion in the world – gather to celebrate a worldwide congress. The first one took place in 1960, in Iran, the cradle of the religion. Most others were orga-

nized in India and a few were held in other countries inhabited by the Zoroastrian diaspora. The 11th World Zoroastrian Congress was organized by the Australian diaspora and took place in June 2018, in Perth, gathering a few hundred participants under the slogan “Together, towards tomorrow.” The overwhelming majority originated from Iranian Zoroastrians and those from India, called the Parsis.

After the Islamization of Iran, most Zoroastrians converted to Islam while others found a new homeland in India. Because of this geographical separation and life in various political, economic, and cultural contexts, the processes of identity construction have taken different shapes. Zoroastrians in Muslim-dominated Iran had to struggle for their place in society and even their survival. Even though their situation improved in the 19th and the 20th centuries, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 brought new challenges for them as a religious minority, which officially was accepted, but marginalized and discriminated by the Shi’a confessional state.¹ On the other hand, those who had left Iran disconnected themselves from the traumatic history of persecution and discrimination. In their own way, the Parsis adapted themselves to the caste system. They replaced their mother tongue with Gujarati in the everyday communication to some extent succumbed to the influence of Hindu beliefs and practices and established their

¹ cf. Niechcial (2013, 2015); Stausberg (2015); Stewart (2016).

well-being and a stable position in the Indian society (cf. Axelrod 1980; Maneck 1997).

The two communities not only did develop differently, but their relations were also marked by changes in mutual perception for centuries. Until the beginning of the 18th century, Iranian Zoroastrians were the authorities in religious matters, and sometimes the Parsis sent questions to Iran to make sure they were following the right version of religious practices or theology. Later, the former lost their position and were struggling to survive as the situation of non-Muslims in their country deteriorated (cf. Boyce 2001: 190–192). On the contrary, the Parsi community gained enough authority to inspire some religious changes among their co-believers in Iran and in the 19th century established ways to help them economically (cf. Hinnells 1985: 282ff.). That period witnessed more intense contacts between the two groups, which not always were free from suspicion or disapproval. Iranian migrants, who arrived in India in the late 19th and early 20th century, to a certain degree integrated into the local Parsi community, whereby many still labeling themselves as “Iranis” in the first place. Over the course of time, the number of mixed marriages increased. Despite the Parsis’ ambivalent attitude towards Iranis, perceived as poorer, less educated, performing customs in a different way, and sometimes caricatured as their “poor cousins,” they considered marriages with Iranis as a means for the community to survive in view of a dramatic population decline and an increase of marriages with outsiders (Axelrod 1980: 157–160; Writer 1994: 55 f.). In Iran, Zoroastrians’ behavior towards the Parsis has been characterized by an admiration for the way those had adapted themselves to a life in India and, at the same time, maintaining some customs already abandoned by the Iranians, such as comprehensive training for priests or exposing the dead in designated towers (*dakhme*). On the other hand, they are somewhat criticized for forsaking their mother tongue and some customs (Niechcial 2013: 225 f.).

Meant to be a tool to provide integrity, the 2018 congress actually revealed how divided the Zoroastrians are, even though there is an awareness of the most current problems that need to be resolved together. Some time ago, inspired by the book of Rashna Writer “Contemporary Zoroastrians. An Unstructured Nation” (1994), Kłagisz and myself discussed the issues of contemporary Zoroastrian identity (Niechcial and Kłagisz 2016). Writer assumed the existence of a national identity linking Zoroastrians worldwide. Instead, we have argued that there were no visible traits of such an

identity across the borders and have pointed towards some factors – varying in Iran and India – shaping a sense of belonging to local ethno-religious communities (Niechcial and Kłagisz 2016). The congress provided me with observations in line with that contribution. The tensions and misunderstandings in the Zoroastrian environment refer not only to customs or religious matters but also to the question of who “real” Zoroastrians are today. In this article, I will share my findings based on participant observation conducted during the 11th World Zoroastrian Congress as well as on the analysis of resources obtained during my research on the contemporary Zoroastrian community. Treating Zoroastrians of Iranian and Indian origin as two ethnic communities, this article offers a close look at the congress participants and their relations along with the indication of components complicating their integration, as well as the boundaries between Zoroastrians and the outside world.

More than One Zoroastrianism

The representatives of different Zoroastrian communities, having no central authorities, came to the congress in Perth with different expectations and objectives. Although difficult to estimate, the number of Zoroastrians worldwide is approximately more than 100,000, albeit in decline, as their population decreased by 10 percent between 2004 and 2012. The largest population centers are in India (61,000 in 2012), North America (almost 21,000), Iran (15,000), and Great Britain (5,500). Zoroastrian communities are also present in other countries, e.g., of the Gulf Region, in Pakistan as well as in Australia and New Zealand (Rivetna 2013: 26; cf. Patel 2010).

The diasporas, consisting of different groups of people originating from Iran and India, are not free from internal tensions. In the context of migration, mutual prejudices and disagreements regarding religious practices have gained significance. There is a variety of elements that complicates integration. Differences in traditional clothing, music, or cuisine are accompanied by different perceptions of religious matters. Both groups – usually sharing temples or institutions – face the practical need for a consensus on the forms and dates of festivities performed according to different calendars. In some places, like the West Coast of the USA, they tend to live separately, establishing their own cultural institutions and celebrating their own religious life (cf. Rose 2011: 221 f.). In

other places, such as Chicago, they try to cooperate and join each other in the festivities imported from the two homelands.

One of the key points of dispute among Zoroastrians is the perception of religiosity. Parsis criticize Iranians for not being devoted enough to wearing *sedre* (special skirt) and *kosti* (belt), that means professing Zoroastrianism, and, vice versa, Iranians criticize Parsis for being too attached to such symbols and rituals like, e.g., the Hindus (Writer 1994: 64). During the congress, however, little emphasis was placed on religious matters, and the program included only a few speeches on this topic along with one ceremony (*jashan*). When I asked one of the organizers about the reason for that, he replied that there was no one with sufficient scholarly or theological authority to discuss religious issues.

A further point of contention is the perception of what constitutes the “real” religion. Iranian Zoroastrians, in particular, value the oldest textual tradition and tend to distance themselves from what might have been developed by priests over the course of time. At the congress, this difference was stressed by an Iranian *mobed* (priest), Kurosh Niknam, presently based in Paris.² He criticized what he called the superstitions developed by the Sasanian priesthood,³ for having nothing to do with the message of Zoroaster, like, e.g., the “Book of Arda Wiraz” about a dream journey to the other world. Niknam also criticized the very expensive congress for not broadening the participants’ knowledge about their own “dying” religion, but repeating the legends as in the movie by Meher Bhesania entitled “Life and Time of Zarathushtra,” that instead of presenting the historical facts about the origins of the religion shows the myths surrounding Zoroaster. Other Iranian participants, asked for their opinion about the congress for the Zoroastrian weekly *Amordad* published in Iran, also mentioned that there was too little about the teachings of Zoroaster.⁴

And there was yet another point that divided the congress participants: the priestly education, which, in Iran, was greatly simplified in the 20th century, because of the reforms of ritual life as well as the drastic drop in the number of priests

(*mobeds*) before the Islamic Revolution. According to my own observations, sometimes Iranian priesthood is not particularly respected by the Parsis. Moreover, in Iran there exists a category of *mobed-yars* (assistant priest) who – although not born in priestly families like every other priest – are allowed to perform some rituals. In 2011, Iranians opened this position to women, which, I believe, was a response not only to the lack of priests but also to the need to emphasize the equal treating of both sexes in order to underline their distinctiveness from the Muslims. In India, the ordination of female priests does not exist and it is very rare in diasporas. In Perth, for the first time in the congress history, a female *mobed-yar* joined a group of male priests for the prayers. This was severely criticized later on the Internet by conservative Parsi circles, calling the celebration “a fraudulent Jashan with a so-called female mobed.”⁵

The most visible difference between the two communities during the congress was a linguistic one. The main core of the religious texts is written in the extinct Avestan language, but there are also texts in Pahlavi, the Parsis’ prayers and songs in Gujarati and English as well as the Iranians’ texts in Persian. Some Iranian Zoroastrians communicate in an ethnolect called the Zoroastrian Dari. During the congress, Dr. Esfandyar Ekhtyari, a representative of the Zoroastrians in the Iranian Parliament, used Dari in his speech as “the mother tongue of the Zoroastrians” – and, of course, the Parsis needed a translation. The official congress language was English, understandable for the predominantly bilingual Parsis and for Iranian migrants but not necessarily for Zoroastrians coming directly from Iran. As for the Iranian participants, as published by *Amordad*, one of the points of criticism of the congress was the language issue.⁶ One of them stated clearly that the Iranian Zoroastrians had come and then “did not understand anything.”⁷ The above-mentioned interesting speech by Niknam went almost unnoticed – the English translation of his speech was provided on a screen, but when he suddenly changed the subject of his lecture, it was only understood by a group of Iranians and myself, because the new text has not

2 This particular speech was not included in the program, but due to the short time of his scheduled presentation mobed Niknam was given additional time on the first day.

3 The time of the Sasanian Empire (224–651) was the period when Zoroastrianism became a state religion.

4 See, <<http://amordadnews.com//media//voice//NaziMeravar.aac>> [13.09.2018]; <<http://amordadnews.com//media//voice//RadmanKhorshidian.aac>> [13.09.2018].

5 Some comments appeared in the Facebook group “Parsi Irani Proud Zarathushtis” and others I received circulating as mobile messages.

6 See <<http://amordadnews.com//media//voice//KhodayarAtae.aac>> [13.09.2018]; <<http://amordadnews.com//media//voice//RaminBoostanipoor.aac>> [13.09.2018].

7 See <<http://amordadnews.com//media//voice//IrajArdeshiriana.aac>> [13.09.2018].

been translated simultaneously. One Parsi lady told me that she had listened to his very interesting lecture, but when I pressed her on this, I discovered that she had been following the translation of his scheduled speech rather than the one he then actually gave.

Differences not only exist between Iranian and Indian Zoroastrians but are also visible within the groups. The Parsis are known for a variety of interpretations of their tradition, but – as Kreyenbroek indicated on the basis of his fieldwork – their level of acceptance for this pluralism is rather low and the different fractions of the community view each other as “exponents of the inadequate” (Kreyenbroek 2001: 314; 306–314). There are fractions among Iranians that are linked to different perceptions of the situation in Iran. Here, again, I ought to refer to mobed Niknam’s speech, where he complained that Zoroastrian representatives in parliament are not sufficiently active while Zoroastrians in their own homeland live as if in a cage. Moreover, the generation gap does not help in terms of integration. The majority of the congress participants were elderly people, so the perspective discussed there was mainly their perspective. The representative of so-called young Zoroastrians mentioned the difficulties in communication between the generations, i.e., that the majority of the people there actually had no idea how the young generation lived.

Born as Zoroastrians

Regardless of the differences, tensions, and disagreements, the majority of the congress participants had one common feature: they were born into Zoroastrian families. Ancient Zoroastrianism spread across the Persian Empire, but after Islamization – in the face of assimilation or extinction – the ethnic boundaries of the Zoroastrian communities became crucial for their relations with others (cf. Niechcial 2019; Eriksen 2002: 59–77). Such elements as a common homeland, local history and myths, specific languages, rites, genealogy, and “race” are widely used in the construction of ethnic ties in the communities in Iran and India – although differently in each of them. From this perspective, Zoroastrianism is not a religion of choice but one transferred through generations. The boundary between the community and the outside world is seen as naturally given and, therefore, immovable. Outsiders, in principle, cannot generally be included in the community, neither converted nor adopted. Conservative Parsis

claim that “Parsis adopting a non-Parsi child will not make such a child a Parsi” (Desai 2018).

Some “primordial” communities allow a limited crossing of the boundary through rites of passage such as marriage (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995: 77f.). Among Zoroastrians, however, there is no consensus about intermarriages and echoes of this issue were audible throughout the congress but did not lead to any deeper discussion. In India, the endogamy practiced by the Parsis was a defense mechanism adopted to prevent their assimilation – in this respect the caste system worked to the advantage of this small community (Writer 1994: 58). A great debate erupted at the beginning of the 20th century, when one member of a respected wealthy Parsi family, R. D. Tata, married a French lady, and was followed by others who also intermarried. The Parsi leaders undertook steps to prevent such practices, putting restrictions on marriage outside the community (Writer 1994: 111; cf. Vimadalal 1979). Parsi women who married out of the community were considered excommunicated and deprived of their community rights, even if they were still professing the Zoroastrian religion. In 1981, the case of such a deprivation reached its conclusion in the Bombay High Court that decreed that women marrying exogamously but continuing to profess Zoroastrianism should retain their right to vote in the assembly of Parsi elections (Writer 1994: 112–115). The position of such women and their children, however, is still controversial. For those who perceive the community as linked by “blood ties,” intermarriages are still “racial suicides” (Davar n. d.; cf. Rose 2011: 210f.). There was a talk given on the congress by the Parsi journalist Berjis Desai (2018), who – claiming to represent “intelligent conservatism” – recommended the acceptance of children of Parsi women and non-Parsi men as Parsis and openness to marriages between Parsi and non-Parsi Zoroastrian as a way to prevent the community from shrinking. However, research on Parsi demography in India shows that the declining tendency is caused by the dramatically low fertility, and, therefore, the acceptance of children of intermarriage will not revert the trend (Shroff and Castro 2011: 560).

One of the problems children of exogamously married women are faced with is the ban on visiting Parsi temples in India,⁸ because many Parsis believe that non-Zoroastrians are ritually impure and, therefore, should not enter the temple (cf. Mistree 1982: 102). Occasionally, even Iranian

⁸ The exception from this rule is the temple in Pune, opened by the reformists in 2017.

Zoroastrians were not admitted to do so, for not wearing the *sedre* and *kosti* (Rose 2011: 7). This contrasts with the contemporary openness practiced by Iranian Zoroastrians: at the congress, I talked to a Parsi lady who was disappointed when I mentioned that I had visited Zoroastrian temples in Iran and seen the fire inside. During the “Global Working and Group Meeting” (GWG)⁹ at the congress, one of the Parsi speakers suggested that a cancellation of the visiting ban for children from mixed marriages, could resolve to some extent the problem of the temples in India being unattended due to the drastic decline in the Zoroastrian population. Even though this seems to be a far less revolutionary idea than letting other outsiders in, it was not discussed in any depth – in my opinion, the conservative circles in Bombay are strong enough to prevent such reforms. For those who treat Parsis as connected by blood ties, the words of *ervad* (priest) Jal R. Vimadala are still relevant: “in civilised society, race is not determined by matrilineal descent” (1979: 13).

Historically, divided by religious affiliation Zoroastrians in the Muslim-dominated Iranian society were discouraged to contract interreligious marriages in order not to lose community members to the Muslims and to keep them away from the community, as we know from the Pahlavi writings (Writer 1994: 109). In the 20th century, the number of marriages with outsiders increased, including those with foreigners or Iranians of other religions, such as Muslims or Baha’is. However, even a relatively secularized pre-Revolutionary Zoroastrian community like that in Tehran was generally reluctant to integrate others in the space of family life, and most non-Zoroastrian wives did not participate in the ritual life of extended families and, sometimes, families who accepted the exogamous marriages faced disapproval or even institutional ostracism (Kestenberg Amighi 1990: 283–289). After the Islamic Revolution, the state categorically began to enforce the prohibition of apostasy from Islam. On the one hand, this results in the necessity to renounce one’s own religion in favor of Islam by those who want to marry a Muslim and, on the other hand, in the decline of the non-Muslim population of Iran. Zoroastrian leaders promote endogamy, for example, the Priests’

Council of Teheran (Anjoman-e Mobedan-e) gave the following recommendations to emigrants: “Protect your language and customs and do not marry strangers, and – to sum up – do not sell at any price yourself, your own identity, personality and wonderful past” (Anonymous 2008/1387: 5).

Even though many Zoroastrians – of both Iranian and Indian origin – still consider interreligious marriages as negative, the number of such marriages is increasing drastically. At the congress, Roshan Rivetna, a Parsi activist from Chicago, gave a speech about demographic issues indicating that intermarriages – estimated to be as many as 60% of all marriages – are among the most urgent concerns Zoroastrians are faced with, along with the decline in religious practices and customs or disinterest in community issues. According to her data, more than one fourth of the children of mixed marriages do not follow the Zoroastrian religion. This is not surprising, since many of them feel excluded.

Actually, the recognition of these trends is nothing new to the community. Exactly forty years ago, Parsi activist Shiavax D. Nargolwala had referred to such problems as “demographic and economic trends, ignorance of religion, priestly class and their amelioration, inter-communal marriages, legal reforms, problems relating to the disposal of the dead, leadership of the community and the need for appropriate organisation at national and international levels” (*Third World Zoroastrian Congress* 1981: 36). Most Zoroastrians still wait for the solutions.

Zoroastrians by Choice

Whilst the 2018 congress has been primarily set up for those born into the Zoroastrian community, to the surprise of some, the congress also hosted a small group of Iraqi Kurds who considered themselves as Zoroastrians. This leads us to the question of conversion that – like intermarriage – by Zoroastrians is seen as ambivalent and with no consensus, which was also visible during the congress. The discussion about conversions to Zoroastrianism involves arguments regarding the interpretation of religious writings as well as those referring to ethnicity. Historically, in Muslim Iran such a discussion had been of no significance, because until the beginning of the 20th century the Zoroastrians were a poor and persecuted community and not appealing to outsiders. A formalized objection to conversion was not expressed and, moreover, the historical texts of “Persian Rivay-

⁹ Established in 2005 as the “Coming Together Round Table” at the 8th World Zoroastrian Congress in London, GWG is a body comprising the representatives of a variety of Zoroastrian associations all over the world.

ats”¹⁰ indicated that conversion was considered possible, at least in theory.¹¹ In the 20th century, a few conversions of foreign non-Zoroastrian spouses were formally accepted. The Zoroastrian Council of Tehran refused to accept Muslim converts in line with the Iranian law that forbids apostasy from Islam, but sometimes priests in villages of the Yazd Province performed Zoroastrian marriages for Zoroastrian-Muslim couples (Kestenberg Amighi 1990: 283–286). Some Muslims had their *sedre-pushî* performed (the rite of initiation, equivalent of Parsi *navjote*) under the slogan of “returning” to the faith of their ancestors (Niechcial 2013: 198). The post-Revolutionary political system definitely repealed the possibility of formal conversion and even though many Iranians sympathize with Zoroastrianism, there are restrictions that limit their possibility of taking part in Zoroastrian religious and cultural life.

Among the Parsis, the ideological discussions about conversions were and continue to be noticeable. Despite the remarks coming from Iran, over the course of time, for many Parsis “race” became the most integral part of their cultural identity, separating them from others (Maneck 1997: 37 f.). The first recorded act of conversion to Zoroastrianism in India was the *navjote* of R. D. Tata’s French wife. Performed in 1903, it deepened the tensions regarding these issues in the community and was impulse for a legal definition of a Parsi Zoroastrian based on both race and religion (Writer 1994: 111; cf. Vimadala 1979). The assembly of Parsis approved the resolution that “it will be incorrect to convert people from other religions, as such a move would be damaging to the community, and shatter its ancestry and unity” (Dhalla 1999: 124). This did not end the discussions and, over time, it also spread into the Parsi diasporas, especially triggered by the *navjote* of an American Christian, Joseph Petersen, in 1983 in New York. Parsi religious leaders from Bombay referred to his *navjote* in the following words: “The so-called Naojot is an insult, mockery and a cruel joke perpetrated against both the Zoroastrian and Christian religions” (Mirza et al. 1983: 1). These are no surprising words of those who perceive their community identity as built on “race.” The Priests’ Council of Tehran commented on this in another way, stating that “if we Zoroastrians believe that our religion is one of the great living religions of the

world and that it is beneficial to all the peoples of our world, we must persevere to propagate it” (quoted after Writer 1994: 127). In North America itself, some of the communities also expressed their disagreement while others favored the idea of conversion – 80% of the members of the Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York (ZAGNY) supported the report, stating that a Zoroastrian is either the offspring of a Zoroastrian or one who has performed the *navjote* ceremony (Writer 1994: 125).

In spite of the controversies about conversions so-called Neo-Zarthushtis all over the world are stressing belief and not birth, and those who have converted to Zoroastrianism are difficult to estimate in numbers (cf. Rose 2011: 226–228). The process is extending. Recently I took part in the *sedre-pushî* ceremony of two Polish people, held in Poland for the first time and performed by a priest of Iranian origin. Shockingly for many participants of the congress, mobed Niknam performed a *sedre-pushî* for a young Iranian migrant, who by some was perceived as one who “reverts” to the ancestor’s religion. Such conversions may be politically motivated, which is the case of some Iranians, Tajiks, and Kurds, who in Zoroastrianism find an element that strengthens their cultural identity with regard to the political order dominant in their countries. The current Zoroastrian movement in Kurdistan, made known by a group of Kurds at the congress, is an interesting case that I encountered for the first time during my fieldwork in Iran in 2008. One of the *mobeds* (priests) had told me, that about half a year before our conversation, the Priests’ Council of Tehran had been visited by three Kurds, accompanied by a Persian interpreter. They claimed to be Zoroastrians and my interviewee called them *zartoshtiyân-e novîn*, the Persian equivalent of neo-Zarthushtis. He mentioned that this would be an interesting case for a researcher, but distanced himself from what in the Islamic Republic of Iran would be perceived as a punishable apostasy from Islam (Niechcial 2013: 197).

Considering the recent interest of Kurds in Zoroastrianism, Foltz stated that there exists no documented historical evidence of any Zoroastrians of Kurdish origins, and the claims, that in ancient times Kurds had practiced a form of Zoroastrianism for the first time appeared in the 1930s, in the Kurdish nationalist press (2017: 91). In Kurdistan, the main centre of the Zoroastrian movement is Sulaymaniyah, but there are also others abroad. In Sweden, the converts assert that their number include thousands of people and, in 2012,

10 A collection of letters in Persian from Iranian priests in response to questions by their Indian counterparts on a variety of religious topics, written between 1478 and 1773 C.E.

11 Boyce (1984: 153); Rose (2011: 201); Saati (2002).

they opened a temple there. The fuel for this phenomenon in its present shape – as a part of nationalistic Kurdish identity of those disappointed by Islam – was the rise of ISIS, in 2014. According to Szanto's filed observations, Kurdish converts actually are not interested in studying religious texts or following the rituals being practiced in Iran or India. Instead, they focus on stressing the difference from Islam that manifests itself in such Zoroastrian values as freedom of religion, women's rights, and opposition to slavery and immorality (2018: 102–104).

The Kurdish conversions are highly controversial issues within Zoroastrian communities. The ultra-conservative Parsi leadership in India is opposed to accepting anyone new into the religion (Foltz 2017: 96). However, the claim to be “reverts” gives Kurds access to the more liberal circles of Zoroastrians, as, e.g., those connected to FEZANA, the coordinating body for 27 Zoroastrian Associations of North America. In spring 2013, in an article in *FEZANA Journal*, with a focus on Kurds and their Zoroastrian Roots, Dastoor (2013: 57) commented: “Whether we like it or not, there are people in this world who want to revert back to their ancestral religion and practice the faith. This would include the Kurds ... They do not seek or need anybody's permission to do so.” Finally, Kurds were invited to Perth where their representative Awat Darya passionately talked about the persecutions of Zoroastrians in Kurdistan, who for ages had to hide their religion, but finally now can talk about it. She shouted: “Let's be one, there is one God and one Zoroaster, one Gathas.”¹² The delegation talked about the thousands of Zoroastrians in Kurdistan, but I was told that there was some controversy behind the scenes about the large numbers of Kurdish converts they wanted to present and the length of time they wanted to be given to speak.

In line with what Szanto wrote, the political aspect of this case was revealed during the first day of the congress. The participants and their respective countries were presented by means of a slide. The organizers of the congress also had prepared fabric banners and national anthems of each delegate's country, even for myself – the only person from Poland and a non-Zoroastrian. But when the Kurds protested against their classification as members from Iraq, the information on a large screen was changed. They printed out a few copies

of the flag of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and played their own anthem.

Some congress participants with whom I spoke were very interested in the Kurdish case. I also heard a voice of surprise asking why some Kurds were presented as converts of Iranian origin who, more than any other, had “gone back” to the religion of the ancestors. There were voices of criticism regarding the Kurdish presence, followed by Internet posts written by conservative Parsis, who stressed that Muslim Kurds had “bulldozed their way into the programme” supported by liberals of the *FEZANA* circle. A Parsi activist from a diaspora with whom I talked mentioned that even though change is at hand, people like him are not ready to accept the Kurds.

Parsism

The congress triggered criticism from conservative Parsi circles regarding the prayers offered by the female *mobed-yar*, the *sedre-pushi* of an Iranian migrant, and the presence of the Kurds. The Parsi singer Mani Rao from the USA also fell victim to criticism. She performed the so-called Parsi Anthem – the Gujarati song “Chhaiye Ame Jarthosti,” composed at the beginning of the 20th century – that begins with the stanza “We are all Zoroastrians” and in the refrain, the community is referred to as the Parsis. Knowing that people would sing with her, Rao proposed replacing the word “Parsis” with “Zoroastrians,” in order to bring all the congress participants together and also to include non-Parsi Zoroastrians. This was generally applauded by the audience. However, Internet posts, circulating also as private messages, criticized this as an example for the fact that “Parsism is being deliberately wiped out” and that “under the pretext of doing our Iranian Zarathustis a favour, these reformists are making way for all those round the globe, who call themselves Zoroastrians.”¹³

Although it is difficult to guess how many participants of the congress shared this perspective, I have to admit that the event generally was Parsi-centric, even though the organizers from the Australian Parsi diaspora took pains to stress that it was a Zoroastrian event. The Parsi-centrism was visible in the program which to a great extent focused on both historical and contemporary Parsi achievements in business, science, and other fields. As stated on the website, “We are a proud

12 Gathas - religious hymns in the Avestan language, which are believed by Zoroastrians to be composed by the Prophet Zoroaster.

13 From author's private archive.

community with honest business ethics that is highly respected by those who have known us. Familiar names like Tatas, Godrejs, Wadias, Jeejehoy, Masters, Petits, Camas are household names who have exemplified the community and the world for generations. We salute them all and take their name with Pride. But there are lots of Unsung Heroes who have also left their mark or will – in the History of our times and we would like to acknowledge them also.”¹⁴ The families mentioned here as well as the majority of activists introduced during the congress, the nominees and those awarded at the Award Ceremony were of Parsi origin.

Mobed Niknam in his speech criticized the attitude of the Parsis, who live in their own bubble, marrying their own people, while the religion is dying out. The decidedly less numerous Iranian Zoroastrians had reasons to say that their concerns were not given sufficient consideration¹⁵ and that they wished there would have been more delegates from Iran to present their problems.¹⁶ A major obstacle were the visa issues. Many Iranians, until the last minute, were not sure if they would be able to attend the congress, and especially young people finally were not allowed to leave Iran, as the government feared they would not return. Additionally, the costs of the congress for Iranian citizens were particularly high, considering the current economic difficulties in their country and the low value of the Iranian currency. The lack of an Iranian perspective was visible during the GWG Meeting, to which Dr. Ekhtyari was expected to come, but then did not attend. At the last moment, a person living for decades in the exile was put in the chair of the Iranian representative, and even as the problems of Zoroastrians in Iran were mentioned, there was no one to report about the actual situation.

Conclusion

The 11th World Zoroastrian Congress provided details of the problems contemporary Zoroastrians were faced with. These included the ageing of the population and its shrinking due to a low fertility rate and intermarriages, the decline in priests and

the low level of attraction of priesthood for the younger generation, lack of agreement on conversion, intermarriages, raising children from mixed families, or female priesthood. For an anthropologist, however, the relations and tensions between the congress participants were of more interest. As stated on the official website, the congress aimed to “unite our Zoroastrian community together to secure a future we can be proud of.”¹⁷ Seen from a distance, Parsi and Iranian Zoroastrians think of each other as fellow believers, but tensions arise when they meet. I remember when I showed my Parsi friend a recording of a performance made by female Zoroastrian singers from Iran, she was surprised, that, except for the picture of Zoroaster on the wall behind the singers, nothing was familiar to her, neither the clothes nor the songs nor the language. I felt as if I had opened up a new cultural window to her. When seen from close up, Zoroastrians find out that they not only speak a different language or eat different food, but that they also think differently about their religion, its textual tradition, and its rituals.

Moreover, the tensions occur not only between communities from two “homelands” but also within them. There are Parsis with very conservative opinions, Parsis sharing liberal views, and Iranians sympathizing with different authorities. When they meet in the diasporas, they need to adapt themselves not only to the new social context but also to coexistence with fellow believers that may be culturally very distant. Faced with the demographic decline of the community and the religiosity of the younger generation, as well as the need to adapt themselves to the reality of the host countries, the conflicting issues become an urgent challenge for the community.

The main Zoroastrian communities define their identity in ethnic categories, although differently – by putting stress on different values and behavior. What makes them similar in this respect is their sense of belonging to a community of common origins, and such a congress gives them the chance not only to establish new business or social connections but also rekindle old ones. Table talks concerned ties and family links, the discoveries of long-lost friends and relatives. The participants were like two huge tribes, and I also felt accepted among them. Zoroastrians value academic work, but they were also very interested in how it happened that I had come from Poland to participate. To some extent, many people treated me as a part

14 Quoted from <<https://www.11wzperth.com.au/about-congress/>> [13.09.2018].

15 See <<http://amordadnews.com//media//voice//ParshanKhosravi.aac>> [13.09.2018].

16 See <<http://amordadnews.com//media//voice//MrsKianian.aac>> [13.09.2018].

17 See <<https://www.11wzperth.com.au/about-congress/>> [13.09.2018].

of their tribe, when they discovered that I had met or was in touch with their friends or relatives from Iran.

The relations between the Iranian and Indian “tribes” are complex, and often their members are interconnected. I talked to a young man who lived in a Parsi-dominated community in the USA, a grandson of a renowned Iranian *mobed* and who had been trained for a *mobed* position in India. I talked to an Iranian lady whose family had moved to India for a period of time and who now was living abroad, and at the congress she recognized her old school in a presentation on Parsi history.

Under the congress slogan “Together, towards tomorrow” the participants sought to build an identity consensus and to achieve the same level of complementarity marked by a common religion, even though mutual prejudices, long-term lack of regular interactions or of any central religious authority made such a consensus difficult. The presence of Kurds clearly showed that in the face of population decline and growing number of Neo-Zoroastrians, the self-definitions and the community boundaries need reinterpretation.

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