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The Tajik Case for a Zoroastrian Identity

SHAHIN BEKHRADNIA

What Is Zoroastrianism?

Before I discuss the main subject of this paper, it may be useful to summarise what is meant by the term Zoroastrian. It refers to followers of the teachings of Zoroaster (Zartosht in Persian). According to tradition, one is a legitimate Zoroastrian only if one's parents were also known and attested Zoroastrians. Zoroastrianism is thus an identity ascribed by birth.¹

There is no scholarly consensus about many of the details of Zoroaster's life and times. He is said to have lived perhaps as early as the middle of the second millennium BC in Azarbaijan in north-west Iran, though now serious consideration is being given to the possibility that he came from the Pamir region of Tajikistan. It is said that he travelled to eastern Iran, where he preached his revelation and eventually persuaded King Vishtasp to accept his teachings. It is said that he was murdered in Balkh, in what is now northern Afghanistan. After the conversion of King Vishtasp, all of Iran is thought to have become Zoroastrian, and it continued to be so up to the end of the Sassanian empire (third to seventh centuries AD). During these centuries and particularly during the periods of conquest (Achaemenian empire, sixth to fourth centuries BC, and Sassanian empire, third to seventh centuries AD) the religion also spread to regions outside modern Iran which shared an Iranian culture and could be referred to as Greater Iran. The Arab conquest in the middle of the seventh century AD put an end to the Zoroastrian period of Iranian history. Despite a large number of revolts against the Arab conquerors, many of them documented, within 200 years well over half the population had converted to Islam, some to gain tax exemptions, others to acquire or maintain other privileges, some because of conviction and yet others by force.

In the tenth century a small band of Iranian Zoroastrians decided to leave Iran because they were finding life oppressive. It is said that they took with them an urn containing their sacred fire, the symbol of the religion. It is not clear whether they had a specific destination in mind but after hazarding many dangers by land and sea they finally settled in the Gujerat province of India. Many moved down to Bombay during the time of the British occupation, where a significant proportion of them made their names and fortunes. They became known as the Parsees and clung tenaciously to vestiges of their Iranian culture. Yet they gradually lost the language, the dress and the food of the Iranian Zoroastrians and at one point even a working knowledge of religious rituals.

The Iranian Zoroastrian community meanwhile continued to suffer humiliation, hardship and poverty, all of which led to a dramatic decline in their population. They in turn had to look to the Parsee community for guidance as to correct religious

practice. By the mid-nineteenth century, for almost every Zoroastrian in Iran life was essentially a matter of survival. Yazd and Kerman, both on the edge of marginal sand deserts, had become the last two areas containing Zoroastrian communities. The *jiziya* or infidel tax was levied ruthlessly on people who were wholly dependent on the sun, the rain, the earth and the air, and some of whom owned no land. In the second half of the nineteenth century there were several famines in Iran. The priests who maintained rituals were dependent on the laity for their income, and when the laity was thus impoverished so were the priests.

Zoroaster's teachings were incorporated into the prayers of Zoroastrians, which they call the *Avesta*, collected and written down in about the fifth century AD, probably from earlier versions. The verses containing Zoroaster's teachings in poetic form are known as *gathas*, and are composed in an archaic language similar and comparable in age to the language of the *Rig Veda* from India. Some scholars date the *gathas* to the second millennium BC, which may be an indication of Zoroaster's antiquity, though this is contested by others. Most Zoroastrians are content to believe that their religion was in existence at least by the time of the Achaemenids (Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes and others, sixth to fourth centuries BC), who are generally accepted as having been followers of Zoroaster.²

Zoroaster's teachings dwell on the existence of one Creator (Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord) and two opposed forces within the world, the Good Mind (Spenta Mainyu) and the Evil Mind (Angra Mainyu). Mankind is exhorted to be aware of these opposing energies and to choose to follow the former, from which emanate good thoughts, good words and good deeds. Emphasis is placed on the importance of *asho*, purity, and thus on truth and respect for the natural elements, particularly fire, which is God's most important creation. The Evil Mind is alternatively represented by the followers of the daevic or demonic gods, the Lie (*droj/dru*) and the enemies of Zoroaster and his new religion (*kavi* and *karapan*). The ideas are simple and coherent, and thus accessible to everyone. One does not need a priest well versed in exegesis to make sense of the message (although there is much uncertainty about the actual language and hence the intended meaning of the words). Over the centuries, however, a priesthood evolved with many elaborate rituals and doctrines expressed in texts written in Middle Persian during Sassanian (second to seventh centuries AD) and post-Sassanian times. These later texts came to be regarded as orthodox canons of doctrine and were adhered to strictly by some segments of the Zoroastrian community, particularly the Parsees of India. And while the polar antithesis of Good Mind and Evil Mind continued in the religious discourse of Zoroastrians, in due course the old daevic (pre-Zoroastrian) representatives of the Evil Mind were replaced: a new ideological contrast emerged with the advent of Islam, which undermined not only the older religion but also the broader culture of Iran in the seventh century.

Since the teachings of Zoroaster were first accepted perhaps three and a half thousand years ago, there has been a continuous developing tradition. New religious texts have been composed and added to the body of prayers. Many of these have displayed syncretism, incorporating elements of the ancient Iranian religion Zoroaster was hoping to replace, as well as of many other religions to be found within the Achaemenian and Sassanian empires.

While most Zoroastrians know relatively little about their religion even though they may practise a number of rituals, most will at least articulate (if not manifest) certain moral values. Zoroastrians teach their children that they must be honest and truthful. That they are successful in instilling their simple ethical values seems borne out by the fact that Zoroastrians are recognised by their Muslim compatriots as being more

'trustworthy' than fellow-Muslims. The British recognised this quality, employing Zoroastrians in jobs of great responsibility during the British Raj in India, while British visitors to Iran such as Ella Sykes or Napier Malcolm frequently employed Zoroastrian assistants.³ Zoroastrians are also supposed to be charitable (*kor e kheir kartvun*), a quality which carries merit (*svob*). The opportunities for charitable acts were usually instituted through communal feasts such as *gahambar*, which used to take place six times a year, each time lasting five days, as well as through private acts of compassion and kindness to others. When Zoroastrians achieved relatively wealthy status at the turn of this century, their public charitable acts were on a grander scale: most popular was the founding of schools. Since then hospitals, clinics, housing estates, fire temples and hostels have all been founded as acts of charity. Nowadays people typically give money to maintain or build a fire temple, or donate to the numerous charities which solicit their support in the West. Another characteristic of Zoroastrians is their deep love and regard for trees and other plants and all aspects of nature in general. The colour green is important for Zoroastrians and is still seen in the costumes worn by older women in Yazd, where no Muslim woman wears green visibly. Zoroastrians are traditionally renowned for their agricultural and gardening skills (a feature mentioned by many European travellers in Iran).

In contemporary Iran, the Zoroastrians are referred to as *Zartoshti* by the majority of non-Zoroastrians; but until about 40 years ago it was not uncommon to hear them called *Majus*, *Gabr* or *Gowr* (the last two words being derived from the Arabic *kafir*, infidel), all considered pejorative terms. The Zoroastrians in Iran have experienced dramatic changes in circumstances over the past 70 years, as a result of education, urbanisation and modernisation on the one hand, and of the Islamic revolution of 1979 on the other.

The Zoroastrian Tradition in Tajikistan

The Iranian culture of Tajikistan was subjugated to Islamic culture first by the Arabs but more recently by the Turks or Mongols. Tajiks today therefore see the latter as their main enemy. This attitude is fuelled by the continuing tension between Uzbekistan (a Turkic culture) and Tajikistan over ethnic claims to Bokhara and Samarqand. These two towns, now in southern Uzbekistan, were arbitrarily placed within the administrative authority of Uzbekistan by Stalin in the 1920s. This decision simply ignored the fact that the population of these towns and of the whole southern area was 89 per cent Tajik-speaking and of Tajik culture. Soon after the loosening of ties with Moscow and the fall of the communists in 1991, a book was published by the respected Tajik historian Rahim Massov in which the whole question of the creation of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan was discussed openly for the first time. Since the 1920s the Usbeks have pursued a systematic policy of imposing the Uzbek language and culture upon these towns. It would appear that they have had some success: the population of these two towns, each of them once a symbol of classical Persia, is now only 50 per cent Tajik-speaking. Furthermore, there appear to be few possibilities for the Tajiks there to perpetuate their identity now that each republic is fully autonomous, nationalistic and fearful of ethnic uprisings. In August 1992 Tajikistan television broadcast a programme which featured Tajiks in Samarqand explaining how they are forbidden newspapers, books or schools in the Tajiki medium.

The Tajiks have become fully aware of their critical position and politics features prominently during any conversation. There is widespread fear of fundamentalism. Although the nationalist-democratic movement has many sympathisers and

supporters in reasonable numbers, it does not have the financial or political backing available to the communists or the Islamic parties. There was a rumour circulating in 1992 that the Iranians had been paid to recruit and arm 40,000 men to take over and impose Iranian-style fundamentalism. To many people, mainly intellectuals and urban women, this prospect seems unbearable, although to some it seems inevitable.⁴ For many of those who fear Islamic fundamentalism, the communists are not the ogres traditionally represented in our western media. Indeed, by the end of their first year of independence from the Soviet Union many Tajiks were realising that what independence actually meant was an end to the subsidies that had been provided by the centralised communist regime for schools, hospitals, roads and food supplies. Without the guaranteed support from Moscow that in effect made Tajikistan a viable republic the future is looking frighteningly insecure. The whole infrastructure had been manned by ethnic Russians who are now leaving the republic in their thousands. Meanwhile there are not enough Tajiks with the technical and administrative training to run the republic efficiently: under the communist regime they were kept out of key positions. Many Tajiks naively believed that if the communists were to return to power in Tajikistan then somehow all the centrally funded subsidies would be reapplied and the days of plenty would return. On the other hand, the communists have not endeared themselves to many potential supporters because of their disregard for democratic processes and their readiness to resort to arms and bloodshed in order to force themselves upon the people. Tajiks thus see that political reality is a choice between two evils.

In 1991 a number of Tajiks visiting California and Canada gave lectures on the revival of Zoroastrianism in their republic. The phenomenon they described was familiar, recalling the cases of other groups who have reclaimed Zoroastrianism: Azarbaijani intellectuals, Yazidi Kurds and Iranian Muslims who are now members of the California-based 'Zarathustrian Assembly'. In these groups we have examples of people who have decided to subsume a specific religious identity to a superordinate Iranian cultural irredentism. For such people their national identity is expressed not in Islam but in the context of the Iranian cultural heritage. They see all that they are most proud of as deriving from a moral and spiritual order inspired by the religion of pre-Arabic and pre-Islamic Iran. These disparate groups have intriguingly surfaced at more or less the same time, though through quite different political circumstances: the Yazidi Kurds found their voice during the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War; the Iranian Muslims of California created the Zarathustrian Assembly after three million Iranians had fled the Islamic Revolution; and groups of Azarbaijanis and Tajiks declared themselves after the break-up of the Soviet Union. It is important to stress that these neo-Zoroastrian groups still represent a minority within their areas. In none of them, moreover, is there a living and continuous tradition that is indisputably Zoroastrian in the conventional sense. However, it would be arrogant to say that they are not therefore 'Zoroastrians', since this is how they define themselves.⁵

In Tajikistan a considerable proportion of the population, both young and old, remains deeply aware of the heritage of a pre-Islamic past, of which they are intensely proud, with which they identify and about which they are well informed. The importance they attach to their Iranian legacy should not be underestimated – although, as André Bertrand points out, the sense of 'Iranian' identity has not led to any form of pan-Iranian movement.⁶ To a great extent this heightened awareness has been an ironical legacy of Soviet colonial policy in Central Asia. While the Soviet authorities suppressed much of the cultural tradition of the European USSR, I would go as far as to assert that in Tajikistan they probably did more good than harm. One has only to

look across the border to Afghanistan or Iran to see how things might have turned out but for the Soviet annexation and integration of this Iranian-speaking and culturally Iranian Central Asian republic. The Soviet authorities established clinics, schools and roads; provided food,⁷ electricity and telephones to the region, including the remote mountainous area of Badakhshan which will be discussed later; and educated the population to a level which means that the republic enjoys a 99 per cent level of literacy, a level unmatched in Iran, Afghanistan, India or Pakistan. The population has had access to reading materials which, although censored and of limited scope, have provided contact with a much wider worldview than they might otherwise have had, bearing in mind their remote and enclosed position. Their contact through the Soviet system with other cultures and traditions within the Union has also developed a broadmindedness and tolerance that their Iranian and Afghan cousins seemingly lack. Most importantly, since the Soviet system attached great importance to 'culture', and since the state heavily subsidised and sponsored dance, music, theatre, journalism, poetry and sciences including archaeology, the Tajiks were given a convenient framework in which to collect and preserve their traditions.

Even before the collapse of Soviet authority in 1991, various opposition groups had organised themselves and were using media outlets to express their aspirations. The champions of 'democracy' shared an attachment to their ancient past and an antipathy to Islamicisation.⁸ Over an eight-day period in the summer of 1991 over a dozen articles appeared in various newspapers, women's magazines and literary journals dealing with the subject of Zoroastrianism, its principles and morality, and the pre-Islamic historical framework.⁹ A prominent author of many of these articles was a poet from Badakhshan, SalimShah e HalimShah. He had also been invited to give lessons on Zoroastrianism and its scriptures (the *Avesta*) to university students, a number of whom then enthusiastically declared themselves Zoroastrians. The autumn festival of *Mehrgon* was declared an official state holiday alongside Persian New Year, *Nowruz*, and there was some talk of reintroducing the fire festival, *Sadeh*. A leaflet explaining the history of the celebration of *Mehrgon* was distributed, and apparently scattered by helicopter to inform the public in remote areas about the new festival. In the autumn of 1992 an international congress on the *Avesta* was convened in the capital, but was poorly attended because of civil unrest.

In 1991 a number of people, including some from the Shoghnan and Wakhan regions of Badakhshan, set up a non-political organisation of Zoroastrianophiles¹⁰ and looked to the poet SalimShah as their inspiration. They had apparently had discussions about an appropriate name for the organisation, and had decided that it would be prudent for the time being to call themselves the 'Society of Admirers of Ancient Iranian Culture'. Since SalimShah and many of the founder members were employed at the state-run House of Writers, some of them engaged on the newly launched Persian-script newspaper, they set up a temporary base for the Society there. They subsequently tried to find funds to enable them to set up an independent centre, and looked to the world Zoroastrian community to help them.

The Wakhi and Shoghni members of the Society hold that many of their local traditions are derived from Zoroastrianism, and are sure indicators of a not-too-distant Zoroastrian past. The religion of the Badakhshanis was traditionally Ismaili, and some argue that this sect has a direct connection with Zoroastrianism since the founder Ismail was a descendant of the union of the prophet's great grand-nephew with the Zoroastrian princess Shahrbanu, daughter of the last Zoroastrian king of Iran. This king, Yazdegerd, is known to have fled the Arabs and headed for China, and it is suggested that he may have sought refuge in the region of the Pamirs. A photo-

copied nineteenth-century manuscript copy of the *History of Shoghnan* by Heydar Shah contains several contemporary references to fire worshippers and infidels, terms usually reserved exclusively for Zoroastrians by Muslim writers in Persian. Informants also say that they have a hazy collective memory, based on oral history, of their forefathers having had a different religion. It is of course possible that much of this may merely be wishful thinking. There are, however, the independent writings of European travellers throughout the nineteenth century in which references are made to the inhabitants of the Pamirs, and in the most widely known of these, *Through the Unknown Pamirs*, written in the late nineteenth century, the author singles out the Wakhis as people whose customs manifest what he believes to be aspects of Zoroastrianism.¹¹

The ancient towns of Bokhara, Samarqand and Panjikent, located in the Zarafshan river valley, are home to people with a sophisticated pre-Islamic culture. This culture was one in which Zoroastrianism of a more or less conventional type was the major spiritual and moral influence. The archaeological evidence for this is abundant in this area and the local people are aware and proud of their traditions, many of which, they point out, have clearly been maintained from pre-Islamic times. Some Panjikent wedding rituals may serve as examples. The bride and groom walk around a flaming brazier before entering the groom's home for the evening wedding reception, throughout which honorific speeches are made, all prefaced by the formula 'may the bright rays of the sun, the stars and candles shine upon you, and with a crown upon your head, may you see the light'. Villages and other sites bear names such as Mogh-tapeh (Magus Hill), Kofer-tapeh (Infidel Hill), Qaleh ye Mogh (Magus Fortress) and Darya e Moghiyan (Magus River), *mogh* being the standard word for a Zoroastrian priest. These toponyms would suggest settlements holding on to their own faith against an increasingly Islamicised background.

During the past few years Tajiks have been able to learn a good deal about life in Iran, thanks *inter alia* to the nightly nine o'clock television news broadcast directly from Iran during 1992. On my recent visit women in particular took up this theme, expressing their dislike for the way Iranian women dress. Their dislike of the *chador* has been further reinforced by official delegations from Iran, including women in their typical black shrouds. Tajiks are increasingly aware that their social and cultural traditions, such as weddings where men and women drink, dance and mingle freely, would be curtailed if they adopted Islam as practised in Iran today.¹² Nevertheless, Tajiks are sentimental about Iran and therefore show great enthusiasm and delight upon meeting Iranians. Their loyalty to Iranian culture was manifest in the choice of a new flag for Tajikistan. After two rounds of competition in 1992, the final choice rested with a flag of the traditional Iranian bands of green, white and red, but also bearing the ancient symbol of Iran, the lion and the rising sun with a crown above it. Many people can recite by heart verses from Rudaki, renowned as the first of the great Persian poets, whose birthplace is in Tajikistan. Ferdowsi and Hafez, the most famous of classical Persian poets, are also very well known and are recited at any opportunity. A statue of Ferdowsi was unveiled in Tajikistan in September 1992. He is depicted holding fire in one of his hands, a symbol greeted with enthusiasm by those Tajiks who admire the pre-Islamic period.¹³ Tajiks greatly respect poets for their skills and wisdom, and generally the ordinary people appreciate music, dancing and other aspects of culture. This attitude contrasts with the more elitist and esoteric attitude towards 'culture' in the West; while 'culture' in Iran today is manipulated for propagandist ends.

On a recent visit I chanced to share a taxi with a young man named Farhad, from the

village of Rudaki, birthplace of the eponymous classical poet. He recited passages from the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi and the *Divan* of Hafez, the two best known poetic works of classical Persian, in which the pre-Islamic era is covertly praised at the expense of the Arabs. He then went on to quote verses from the most famous and popular of modern Tajik poets, Layegh Sherali, a native of Panjikent, who is apparently deeply immersed in his own private quest for his historical roots, and whose verses acknowledge the wisdom of Zoroastrianism.¹⁴ Farhad said that he always carried a copy of Hafez with him wherever he went, so sacred did he consider him to be. What was particularly interesting was that he insisted that like his mentor, the poet Sherali, he was a Sogdian or *Sughdi*. It was quite clear that by giving himself a label associated with the pre-Islamic culture of the area, he was obliquely distancing himself from an exclusively Muslim identity. Indeed, he overtly stated that if ever Tajikistan were to be governed by a fundamentalist Islamic government, he would leave and never return. Although his degree of conviction on this matter was initially surprising, it turned out to be a quite widely held sentiment, echoed in the intention of the Zarafshan basin – Velayat e Shemoli, the northern region including Khojand, formerly Leninabad – to declare its independence if an Islamic government should come to power, an intention already expressed in a telegram sent to the parliament in Doshanbe. Since then, in the early stages of the civil war which erupted at the end of 1992, this region did split away and formed its own government in Khojand with leanings towards Uzbekistan, and provided the key members of the new neo-communist regime subsequently installed in Doshanbe.

Panjikent, also in the northern region, is today a modern town, but its international importance lies in its cultural past dating back to before the Arab conquest of Iran and Central Asia. Its last ruler, Divastyich, chose to become a tribute-paying king under the Arab caliphs rather than accept their faith and rule, but eventually he was crucified by the local emir, apparently against the wishes of the caliph. Some fragments of manuscript in his own hand still survive to tell his tale. That pre-Islamic culture was sophisticated and tolerant in this area is amply demonstrated by rich and varied examples of wall paintings, statues and silver bowls as well as evidence suggesting the presence of Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism alongside local cults and fire temples which are thought to have been of Zoroastrian origin.¹⁵ These have been discovered by Russian archaeologists over a number of decades, the most recent team being led by Professor Marshak, who has been excavating there with his colleagues each summer for the past 40 years. (He gave the Cohen lecture at the Ashmolean in Oxford in 1991). He holds the view that the former religion of the area was a free form of old Zoroastrianism, and some of his ideas have been echoed by Dr Kreyenbroek from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in a recent lecture on the relevance of Pahlavi literature to today's Zoroastrian community. The increasingly accepted view is that Zoroastrianism has been a dynamic religion, undergoing change and adaptation according to the social conditions of area and time. This was particularly so as far as private domestic ritual was concerned: because of its very nature, this ritual could not be controlled by any central authority. Later, of course, after the onslaught of the Arabs, the central authority of Zoroastrianism was so weakened that it could have no effective control, and village variants incorporating devotions at folk shrines developed (for example, at Pir e Sabz and other shrines in Yazd). By way of an analogy, Professor Marshak mentioned the presence of Ganesh statues in some Parsee homes in India, and one could list many other customs assimilated by Parsees through contact with Hindus in India which have never been observed by Iranian Zoroastrians. Thus in Central Asia, where the practice of

Zoroastrianism was removed from the centre of the faith by a considerable distance, it would not be surprising to see some equally striking divergences in private domestic ritual and belief as we see between some Parsees and Iranian Zoroastrians. Given the geographical location of Panjikent and the other towns mentioned, all positioned on the main silk route, it was obvious that travellers from the Far East and the western world would carry their culture with them when travelling or settling there. This resulted in the syncretic local variant of Zoroastrianism, depicted so richly with statues and wall paintings of god-like figures, reminiscent of Buddhist and Hindu iconography, which has not been found in other Zoroastrian areas. One Tajik archaeologist believes that many of the wall paintings are depictions of the Zoroastrian angels, the *amesha spenta*, and of those who give their names to the months and to each day of the month. He is hoping to produce a calendar of these particular wall paintings. This art form is a typical feature of Sogdian Zoroastrianism and may give a clue to what the historian Tabari is referring when he speaks of 'the idols of the fire-worshippers', since elsewhere early Zoroastrians are not known to have had any visual icons. It should be pointed out that the word 'Zoroastrian' is not found in any of the historical references to this region, just as it is absent from the inscriptions at Persepolis. Nevertheless, just as most scholars accept that the Achaemenids were Zoroastrians, so it is reasonable to accept that references to 'fire-worshippers' implies Zoroastrians by means of a deliberate misnomer.¹⁶ Indeed, the frequent use of the word *mogh*, to mean Zoroastrian priest or magus, supports this view.¹⁷

Fieldwork in Badakhshan

Badakhshan is located among the remote Pamir mountains. Across the main river, the Panj, which later becomes the Amu Darya or Oxus, Afghanistan can be clearly seen. That part of Badakhshan on the northern side of the river was called Upper Badakhshan by the Soviet authorities to distinguish it from the part of Badakhshan on the southern bank in Afghanistan. Since the loosening of restrictions, there has been more contact between the two sides of the river, and the Tajik Badakhshanis are well aware of how much better off they have been than their Afghan kinsmen, whom they describe as living the most wretched lives without roads, electricity, schools or clinics.

Badakhshan already had the status of an autonomous region under the Soviet regime, and it was trying to claim even greater autonomy for its population of about 170,000. I noted earlier that Badakhshanis were prominent among the membership of the Society of Admirers of Iranian Culture. I conducted most of my fieldwork among the Badakhshanis in the company of SalimShah, affectionately known as Zartosht (Zoroaster) by his friends and admirers.

The Badakhshanis are proudly aware of their own distinctive culture, different, they claim, from that of the rest of the Tajiks. Traditionally, they speak of having suffered persecution and harassment precisely because of their specific background. One most obvious difference is a visual one: the Badakhshani population is significantly fairer than the rest of the Tajik population. Any individual in Doshanbe with blue, green or hazel eyes and fairer hair or skin than the rest is very probably a Badakhshani. They are physically very similar to the Kurds. The standard explanation in Badakhshan among the educated is that they are a racially pure group, never having mingled with the Arabs or the Turks because of their inaccessible position. This is of course a familiar argument, which is also voiced by Zoroastrians, particularly in India.

In addition to standard Tajiki/Persian, the Badakhshanis speak any one of eight Pamiri languages,¹⁸ with the majority speaking Shoghni. Of particular interest to

Zoroastrians is the fact that these languages are all from the Eastern Iranian linguistic group, as is the language of the Zoroastrian *Avesta*. Although some of these eight languages are quite different from each other, they are all closer to the language of the *Avesta* than modern Persian. SalimShah has been reading Poure Davoud's edition of the Zoroastrian scriptures in the original language and has been able to identify many words in the *Avesta* still in use in his own Pamiri language. He has identified several toponyms or place names in the *Avesta*, sometimes accompanied by descriptions of the geographical and physical features of these places, which correspond to similarly named places in Badakhshan. He has clearly identified the names of some places with particular phenomena. In Baghiv village, for example, there were two fire temples and a fortress high up on a mountainside overlooking the present-day village. The village name is undoubtedly connected with the word for 'god' in the *Avesta* and old Persian, *baga*. Other fire temples have been excavated and documented by Russian archaeologists throughout Badakhshan, with an important centre in Murghob. In two of the Pamiri languages words exist which are corruptions of *Ahura Mazda*, and in one of them, Wakhi, the word for sun is *mihra* (reminiscent of Mithra or Mehr). The region of Shoghnan, already mentioned as an area with its own specific language, has the largest population, and this is where the capital of Badakhshan, Khorogh, is located. A nineteenth-century *History of Shoghnan* by Heydar Shah contains several references to villages which in the recent past had been under the authority of leaders described as *gabr* and *atash-parast*, both derogatory names for Zoroastrians in Iran. Linguistic similarities and the abundance of what have been identified as fire temples have given rise to a growing body of opinion which is prepared to consider the possibility that Badakhshan was in fact the home of Zoroaster.

SalimShah, himself from a large family in a Shoghni village in Ghund Darreh, one of the valleys which feeds into the Panj river at Khorogh, had many relatives living in town and also in small villages, many of whom we visited. Thus we covered most villages situated in Ghund Darreh and Shakh Darreh, the two valleys whose rivers meet the Panj or Oxus river at Khorogh. In view of the acute shortage of petrol, the fact that the highest-ranking officials were willing to provide it as well as hospitality is indicative of the standing of SalimShah, who is acknowledged as Badakhshan's foremost poet. It also suggests significant interest in and support for the subject we were investigating, namely Zoroastrian vestiges in Badakhshani Pamir culture. Many people we met said that if a fundamentalist regime took power, Badakhshan would secede. Of course, words come more easily than action. If the northern district seceded it might well make common cause with Uzbekistan, but the people of the Pamirs are the poorest section of the population in the poorest republic of the former Soviet Union, and it is hard to imagine them going it alone against armed opposition; indeed, since December 1992, when they were targeted for ethnic cleansing, they have found it impractical to stand against the Doshanbe regime.

The Badakhshanis are well aware that the rest of the Tajiks look on them with some disdain, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that as an ethnic group they possess the highest level of education per capita, not only in Tajikistan but in the whole of the former Soviet Union. A non-Badakhshani taxi-driver confirmed to me that prejudice against them exists. In the 1990 election the main rival to the communist president Nabiyeu was a most impressive and popular Badakhshani, Dowlat Khodonazar.¹⁹ His enemies put around the story that Badakhshanis sleep with their sisters, mothers and in fact all their kinswomen. This myth is based on the fact that in the traditional Badakhshani family home all members sleep in the same room, and in cold winters in the same bed.²⁰ Badakhshan is after all covered in snow for five months of the year. A

similar practice, incidentally, was absolutely the norm among Zoroastrians in Yazd. It was clear to my informant that in this case the intention was simply to stir up old prejudices. Another source of prejudice against the Badakhshanis is the fact that they do not adhere to the conventional style of Islam. They are regarded as heretics and thus outsiders. In 1991 these sentiments were emphasised by a coalition of unlikely partners, the communists and the Islamic Party, to ensure the defeat of the Badakhshani challenge. (By 1993 the democrats had been successfully marginalised, and the Islamic Party was allied with them against the communists!)

My fieldwork revealed abundant aspects of Badakhshani culture which resemble aspects of the culture of the Iranian Zoroastrians. Women in Badakhshan, for example, are highly respected and enjoy an independence unknown in any other part of Tajikistan. Certainly it was noticeable that the women moved freely among men at all times, joking and enjoying all kinds of social interaction, and playing an important and vocal part in the household. Badakhshanis also make much of the fact that they do not lie or cheat. One man of over 80 made it very clear that stealing and dishonesty were sources of disgrace, leading to the loss of reputation and status within a community. He stressed over and over again that lying and cheating were regarded as the worst of all crimes, and that children were brought up with this understanding.

Weddings were an occasion for a number of interesting observations. The bride is traditionally covered in seven headscarves, the uppermost one being bright red and the undermost being white. At various points in the wedding celebrations, usually to mark the end of a particular stage, a mixture of milk and butter into which bread is dipped is offered to all the witnesses, who are called *gavoh*, a word which among the Iranian Zoroastrians has come to mean the ceremony itself. During the preparation of the groom on his wedding day he is ceremoniously shaved, his nails are cut and he is dressed, amid much music, dancing and merrymaking by his men and women kinsfolk, and he is then showered with a mixture of dried mulberries and walnuts, rather like the *lorik* ceremony among Iranian Zoroastrians. When the groom is about to set off to bring his bride home, he first goes to the *zingak* or hearth fire, which doubles as the winter bread oven and is located in the main family room of the traditional Badakhshani house, and there he pays his respect by kissing the hearth and then touching his lips and chest with his fingers. Then as he leaves the room – as on several other occasions when good luck is being invoked – a local dried herb called *strakhm* is ignited in a fire vessel not unlike the Zoroastrian *afriguni*. The herb is considered precious and is revered, as is *esfand* or wild rue elsewhere in Tajikistan. On entering the bride's house he does the same thing at her hearth fire.

Other traditions associated with fire and light are embodied in the structure of the Badakhshani home. In the main room there are seven supporting wooden columns, of which five are fully visible, and each of these carries the name of one of the five Ismaili imams, including Fatima. One is considered more important than the others and is called the *Shah sotoon* (or 'King Column'); something precious is usually hidden under its base. They say that in all the houses it is in the same place in relation to the rest of the building so that as sunlight on *Nowruz* day shines through the roof skylight known as *ruz*, which means 'day' or simply 'light', it falls on this column.²¹ In Badakhshan there is a traditional way of counting the days to *Nowruz*, the reckoning involving the toe nails, toes and legs up to the knee. If there is still snow lying 12 days before *Nowruz*, the custom is to sprinkle ash on it to send it away. When the first rays of the spring sun (*khir* being the word for sun as in the *Avesta*) fall on the house, a person born in the spring takes a twig broom, burns a bit off the end, then sweeps up the sunrays in the house while reciting '*oftob zardi e ruye man az to, va surkhi ye ruye*

to *az man*'. This saying and ritual correspond closely to those used in Iran when leaping over a bonfire on *Chahar Shanbeh Soori*, the Wednesday before *Nowruz*.²² At *Nowruz* the beams in the houses are decorated with patterns using a flour and water mix: this used to be the practice in Yazd, the stronghold of Zoroastrianism in Iran. In several homes I saw a circular engraving on the threshold beam which I was told represented the sun, and this same motif appeared alongside a moon motif at one shrine I visited. In general design, Badakhshani homes recall those of Yazd, with raised platforms called *pishvoz* (corresponding to the Yazdi *pishgam*) opening on to a walled courtyard called *dargoh*. The interior room suggests a winter roofed-over version of the three *pishgams* found in a Yazdi Zoroastrian home. It was also noticeable that in both town and village the Badakhshanis sweep and sprinkle water just in front of their homes at dawn, as the Iranian Zoroastrians used to do, while non-Badakhshanis living in the same area do not.

Finally, we visited a very remote but highly esteemed shrine called Khaje e Nur or 'holy shrine of light'. This place was unexpectedly similar to the most revered of Zoroastrian shrines in Iran, Pir e Sabz, or the 'green holy shrine', also known as Chak Chakun or 'dripping droplet'. As at Pir e Sabz, a particular legend and magical powers are attached to the place. In Yazd there are a number of other shrines to which pilgrimages are made by people who wish to offer a special prayer or to give thanks for a prayer having been fulfilled. So too there are at least four different shrines in the neighbouring valley near Khaje e Nur. The shrine at Khaje e Nur resembles Pir e Sabz in that they are both sources of spring water coming out of the mountain rock, around which an idyllic green grove has grown, offering shade and beauty. It is customary there for visitors to offer *khodayi* or what Zoroastrians call *osh e kheiroi* – charity stews – in thanksgiving or to promote answers to prayers, and the custom of *khodayi* was evidently common at most shrines, judging by the big cauldrons we saw in which cooking on a large scale was carried out. Elsewhere, around the village of Baghiv, there were more similar shrines, and above SalimShah's native village we again visited more of the same. It was interesting to see that these shrines are in fact merely rocks with which special powers have been associated, but which bear names as they do in Yazd. SalimShah believes that the shrine of Khaje e Nur is very ancient and may be the identity of Varjamgerd, a place described in the *Avesta* which corresponds in physical features to this shrine.

There are thus many parallels between Yazdi Zoroastrianism and the customs and way of life of the people in Badakhshan in particular and the Zarafshan valley in general. These examples are circumstantial but like pieces in a mosaic give a hint of what the whole picture might once have looked like. There is undoubtedly substance to Tajik claims to a Zoroastrian heritage. It is obvious that the Tajiks are going through an unstable period in search of their identity and that a number of different interests are at work. However, if in the near future they are able to put aside the arms with which they seem to be sorting out their differences at present, some may yet again choose to express their national identity and sense of unity through the symbols and religion inspired by the Zoroastrian era of their own indigenous culture. For the moment they need help and support. The Badakhshanis who became the focus of my fieldwork, because their lifestyle had maintained so many Zoroastrian parallels, are today in the greatest danger of total catastrophe. Reports speak of famine, death by freezing and epidemics as a likely outcome of the campaign of persecution and terror targeted against them by the neocommunist regime and Muslim fundamentalists at the end of 1992 and start of 1993. Throughout the winter of 1992–3 no supplies of food, fuel or medicines were allowed through from Doshanbe, while a refugee population of

Badakhshanis from Doshanbe, already as large as the 170,000 permanent residents, had arrived in the Pamirs. The population were not prepared for the total collapse of the central Soviet distribution system which provided them with all their food, fuel and clothing and now they are helpless. Unless there is effective international intervention, the prospects for the survival of the Badakhshanis are not promising.

Notes and References

- ¹ There are, however, exceptions to this rule, particularly of more recent date. Adopted children of non-Muslim background, raised within a Zoroastrian household, are accepted as Zoroastrian, as are children of a marriage where either parent may be a non-Zoroastrian but where the children are raised within a Zoroastrian context.
- ² Benveniste, however, argues the case against assuming that the Achaemenians were Zoroastrians. E. Benveniste, *The Persian Religion* (Paris, 1929).
- ³ Eickelman speaks of the tendency of the majority of Iranians to evade and relativise the truth. D. F. Eickelman, *The Middle East, an Anthropological Approach* (Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1956).
- ⁴ See M. Atkins, *The Subtlest Battle: Islam in Soviet Tajikistan* (Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, 1989); also A. Hetmanek's review article of Atkins, *Muslims in Central Asia* (Duke University Press, 1992) in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1990. See also A. Bertrand, 'Naissance d'une opinion publique au Tadjikistan', in C. Poujol (ed.), *Asie Centrale aux Confins des Empires: Réveil et Tumulte* (Autremonde, Paris, 1992), p. 210.
- ⁵ An extreme position was taken just after my most recent visit to Tajikistan by a Parsee Zoroastrian from London. Neither speaking Farsi nor understanding Persian culture, he visited Tajikistan and returned with a very negative assessment of the Tajiks, their land and their claim to Zoroastrianism. Apart from the fact that he was unable to talk directly with any of them, he posed a number of questions designed to establish their position, such as 'do you know the *Avesta*, do you wear a *sedreh* and *koshti*?', most of them questions to which he would receive a similarly negative response if he posed them to young Iranian and Parsee Zoroastrians in the West.
- ⁶ See Bertrand, *op. cit.*, p. 212.
- ⁷ The counterbalance to the provision of an extensive range of non-local foodstuffs was that the Tajiks, like people in most parts of the former USSR, became dependent on imported food. This was a consequence of the Soviet system of highly specialised production and centralised distribution. When this system collapsed the Tajiks, and the Badakhshanis in particular, found themselves unprepared and unable suddenly to fend for themselves in food production.
- ⁸ See Bertrand, *op. cit.*, p. 207. One of the new political groupings adopted the name 'The Cyrus the Great Party' to express its strongly nationalistic attitudes.
- ⁹ See *Firouzeh*, August 1991; *Sadoye Shargh*, nos. 1 and 4, 1991; *Farhang*, no. 4, 1991; *Adabiyot va Farhang*, 8 August 1991.
- ¹⁰ See *Adab va Sannat* (Doshanbe), August 1991.
- ¹¹ O. Olufsen, *Through the Unknown Pamirs* (Heinemann, London, 1904).
- ¹² Tajik public opinion is also discussed by Bertrand, *op. cit.*
- ¹³ Ferdowsi was denied an Islamic burial on the grounds that he was thought to be a clandestine Zoroastrian, just as had been his predecessor, Daqiqi, who had started the *Shahnameh*. Rudaki was also suspected of harbouring Zoroastrian sympathies.
- ¹⁴ During a television speech in Doshanbe (reported in the BBC's *Central Asia Report* digest, January 1993) Layegh Sherali was named as one of two poets who were required to apologise to the new government for having allegedly been active over the past months in trying to restore the old alliance government of democrats and Islamics.
- ¹⁵ See V. A. Ranov (ed.), *Proshloye Srednei Azii* (Donish, Doshanbe, 1987), and E. B. Zeimal (ed.), *Drevnosti Tadjikistana* (Donish, Doshanbe, 1985).

- ¹⁶ Benveniste is the best known of those who contest this view.
- ¹⁷ Some people will argue that reverence for fire was not a monopoly of Zoroastrianism and indeed predated it, and that the textual references to fire-worshippers refer to people who had not given up their earlier 'pagan' practices.
- ¹⁸ The Pamir languages are Shoghni, Ishkashimi, Wakhi, Bartangi, Yazgulemi, Roshani, Roshorvi and Sarikoli (see the introduction to R. Kh. Dodikhodoyev, *Pamirskaya mikrotoponomiya* (Irfon, Doshanbe, 1975).
- ¹⁹ The outcome of the election was a victory for the communist Rahmon Nabiyev with about 57 per cent, while Dowlat Khodonazar polled just over 30 per cent of the votes cast.
- ²⁰ This is also mentioned by Shahrani in connection with Afghan Wakhis. See introduction to M. Nazif Shahrani, *The Kirgiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers* (University of Washington, Seattle, WA and London, 1979).
- ²¹ Olufsen also mentions this custom.
- ²² The translation is 'sun, let the yellow hues of my cheeks come to you and let me take your rosy cheeks upon myself'. This is almost exactly the same wording as that given for the ritual on *Chahar Shanbeh Soori*: see S. Guppy, *The Blindfold Horse* (Minerva, 1988), p. 194. The implication is clear: that these are deeply rooted traditions common to cultures separated by hundreds of miles, but still maintaining almost identical customs deriving from pre-Islamic days.