

The Zoroastrian Endeavour to Venerate and Care for the Earth

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When preparing this paper on the Iranian love of nature and treatment of the environment, I found myself recalling those many pieces of information I had collected during several years of reading into the Zoroastrian sacred books, in Avestan and Pahlavi. When I got these relevant items arranged in due order I became aware that many important questions had arisen which I could not solve. Possibly future discussions like those in this symposium will contribute solutions to these problems.

Some months ago, during the Gatha Congress in London, a young Iranian scholar put the rhetorical question to me: "Aren't we Zoroastrians the real protectors of the environment from time immemorial? Wasn't it Zoroaster who at first made us conscious and responsible to avoid the pollution of the world? Isn't it that our religion is the most progressive one of all?" Indeed there is no question that the Zoroastrians, and their next of kin people the Indians, keep a specially deep feeling of responsibility to nature. I believe it was the Indian concept of *ahimsâ* ("non-violence") which motivated Brigitte Bardot to fight for the seals; but the roots of this Iranian love of nature seem to be much more profound than the modern trends and fashions of politics.

German travellers to Iran mentioned several times their surprise that Iranian behaviour at least on this particular point is quite familiar with their own: they love nature and they enjoy to walk through forests and wildernesses. At weekends in Tehran and in Munich alike mountaineers in hundreds move to the mountains and climb one or two thousand metres. And it seems every Iranian has the urgent desire to possess a small garden outside the walls of the town. On my last journey near to Tehran I was enjoying a garden at Ab-e Ali high up in the Elburs mountains, and later a garden outside the town of Yazd, and on both occasions we were preparing *kabab* not unlike the German barbecue.

This Iranian behaviour is quite unusual in Asiatic countries, for rarely indeed would you meet people walking for pleasure in Egypt, Turkey or Arabian Syria. You would find some people doing so in India, but not in China or Central Asia. So there seems no question that this is an Indo-European heritage joining Germans walking in their *Deutschen Wald* and Iranians climbing the Touchal mountain!

But let us try to trace back this Iranian love of nature. One of the most interesting Zoroastrian books is the *Bundahishn* ("the Creation of the World").¹ It is preserved in a Pahlavi version but originally it was composed in the Avestan language, and its name was *Damdad Nask*. In this book we read about the creation of the seven parts or elements of the world, that is, heaven-water-earth-plants-animals-mankind-fire. This is also the succession of their creation, heaven to be formed first and fire latest by God Ahuramazda. European scholars would divide this line into two groups, one animate and one inanimate; they would distinguish between the four elements, fire-water-air-earth and the three kinds of living beings, plants-animals-mankind. But soon we will see that Zoroastrians keep a quite different feeling to these elements than modern European science, because for them all these seven elements are animate. And all these elements are suggested as being able to act intelligently; they are the forces of Ahuramazda fighting against Ahriman, as described in the *Bundahishn*.

I will not centre my paper on mythology, though, but more on customs and belief. Only one

¹ Behramgore Tehmuras Anklesaria (trans.), *Zand-âkâsih, Iranian or Greater Bundahishn*, Bombay, 1956.

remark of the *Bundahishn* seems very important to me for understanding the Zoroastrian attitude to nature: not all beings were created by Ahuramazda, some were made by Ahriman and these are bad. So Zoroastrians do not like turtles, which they believe to be creations of Ahriman.

I did not get much information about the veneration of heaven and air. Asman and Vayu are protecting angels of two days of the month. But heaven is the home of the stars and of sun and moon, and the light of the morning sun is venerated by Zoroastrians with a full heart. I still remember an excursion together with a group of Parsis. After leaving Bombay early in the morning by train we crossed the huge backwaters on a long bridge just at sunrise, the light and brightness spreading up to the horizon. My friends at once fell down for prayer. Already Herodotus² tells us that the Persians climbed mountains to engage with God at sunrise. Certainly the Persian religion is the religion of light. I think Zoroastrians are not venerating the sun itself but the brightness of light as the expression of the clearness of God Almighty. My friends in the train prayed to God when they admired the rising sun.

Water seems to be venerated by Zoroastrians and all Persians in two different ways. Our German excavations at the Sasanian sanctuary of Adur Gushnasp on Takht-e Suleiman in Azarbaijan exposed the firetemple at the shore of a very deep lake,³ which is mentioned several times in Avestan texts as Lake Chaichasta - "the white gleaming water". It was an offering place of ancient kings of Iran, and it seems to be that the brightness of sunrise over the clear water was venerated more than the lake itself.

But there are several Achaemenid and Sasanian monuments erected near to a spring of water, which was apparently venerated in animate form. In Naqsh-e Rostam there was a big cascade of 20m height,⁴ now dried up, and just beneath it King Narses son of Shapur I dedicated a beautiful rockrelief. He is depicted offering a flower to the lady of the cascade. Similar reliefs with the picture of the lady of the animate spring are known at Barm-e Delak and Qandil near to Shiraz. Our German excavations at Bisotun⁵ near Kermanshah have shown that Darius got his famous rock inscription sculptured just in front of a spring, which now has shifted considerably to the slope of the mountain. We could also find out more interesting things by excavating the ancient water basin built in the Achaemenid period. The inscription says that at this place, Bisotun or ancient Kunduru, the king fought his decisive battle against the Median rebels, and most probably it was the water of this spring which refreshed the soldiers and their horses and gave them new power. So King Darius paid homage to this spring for her personal support.

Still today in Bombay you can meet the Parsis venerating a sacred well near to Churchgate Railway Station. This Bikhe Bahram is famous for its excellent water which saved the life of many people during a cholera epidemy a century ago. In Naqsh-e Rostam, Bisotun und Bombay water is venerated as a shelter-giving well or spring which is conceived to be animate, a personality acting with free will, and even choosing the right king during battle for support.

Earth, similarly to water, seems to be venerated in two different ways. Being the ground on which we place our feet, earth as a whole is supporting and bearing us. But there are special spots of earth, mainly mountain places, where the earth is venerated in small sanctuaries. Famous between Iranian Zoroastrians are the sanctuaries near to the city of Yazd, Pir-e Sabz, Pir-e Heresht and Pir-e Naraki.⁶ In legends it is told that these mountains gave protection to the daughters of the last Sasanian king

² Herodotus, *Historiae*, I, 132.

³ R. Naumann and H.H. von der Osten, *Takht i Suleiman, vorläufiger Bericht über die Ausgrabungen 1959* (Teheraner Forschungen 1), Berlin, 1961.

⁴ G. Gropp, *Urartaische Miszellen* (Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran N.F. 22), Berlin, 1989, 103-124; L. Vanden Berghe, *Reliefs rupestres de l'Iran ancien*, Brussels, 1984.

⁵ W. Kleiss and P. Calmeyer (eds.), *Bisotun, Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in den Jahren 1963-1967* (Teheraner Forschungen 7), Berlin, 1995.

⁶ Jamshid Soroush Soroushian, *Farhang-e Behdinan*, Tehran, 1956.

Yazdegerd when they were persecuted by the invading Arabs. Today every year on certain weeks people assemble in these places for pilgrimage. These mountains seem to be animate individuals who helped humans in danger, and still today they will bring good luck to the pilgrims.

Some of these sanctuaries, like Pir-e Heresht and Pir-e Banu Pars near Yazd, seem to have been ancient offering places like those mentioned in Avestan texts. The ancient kings of the heroic era would offer sheep to God on the top of mountains and places like these.

Let us have a look at the veneration of plants and animals. There are many growing trees guarded with love by Zoroastrian and Muslim communities likewise. Famous is the story told by Herodotus about King Xerxes, who one day on his campaign against Greece was delighted by a beautiful sycamore-tree and then had it adorned by a golden chain as a present.⁷ In two towns of Khorasan even up to today the legend is preserved of a huge cypress planted by prophet Zoroaster himself and cut down centuries later by Muslim rulers.⁸ One is the cypress of Keshmar destroyed by the Kalif Mutawakkil, the other tree grew in Forumad and was felled by the Khwarazmshah. But wonderful cypresses - *sarv* - are still venerated today by the Zoroastrians in villages near Yazd and by Muslims in Abarquh and Gonabad. And plantane trees - *chenar* - are beloved objects of care in many Muslim sanctuaries in Tehran-Jamran or in Khorasan.

I could continue with some observations about veneration of beautiful animals and extraordinary men and women. The Achaemenids fostered a group of beautiful white horses depicted at the Apadana of Persepolis and mentioned by Herodotus.⁹ Similarly the Sogdians had a flock of sacred geese which we can see on a Sasanian mural from Samarkand-Afrasiab. These sacred animals were specially connected with the ruling family. The inscription of King Narses at Paikuli¹⁰ expressly gives a statement that only kings like the Sasanians Ardashir and Shapur are worth worship, and have to be kept in mind as exemplary rulers. Places of worship for these persons were fires installed by them.

All the Zoroastrian communities settle around a sanctuary with a burning purified fire. As far as I know the fire is protecting the village and is giving the identity to its citizens. So they would try to take it with them to the new abode if they are obliged to move the settlement. The Parsis moved the fire of Udwada-Atash Bahram from faraway Iran to India. Fire to me seems to be much related to earth, as far as I suggest it is something like the power of earth like the Persian homeland Miha. It seems that the words of Darius in his Persepolis inscriptions - that "God created happiness (*s'iyâti*; Persian: *šadi*) for mankind" - are related to the earth also, for through earth this happiness is advancing to man. Here I must return to another aspect of the earth again.

There is a whole book of *Avesta* concerned with the earth - the *Vendidad*.¹¹ Chapter 1 talks about the sixteen lands of the Iranians, beginning with Iran Vez, with all of them being wonderful abodes that were afterwards polluted with plagues by Ahriman. The second chapter gives the famous story of King Jamshed ruling a golden age when people were not dying or growing old or getting sick, and everyone was being kept at the age of 15 or 30 years. And then Jamshed was informed that soon Ahriman would destroy this paradise. So he got the advice to build a subterranean palace, the *var-e Jamshed*, where he and a group of selected warriors are surviving up to the last days. The other chapters of the book are full of instructions and ritual ceremonies to purify the world again after it was polluted by Ahriman.

It is not allowed to a Zoroastrian to pollute flowing water or the earth. Pollution by corpses is very

⁷ Herodotus, *Hist.*, VII, 31.

⁸ B. Spuler, *Zoroasters Zeit nach einer islamischen Überlieferung des 12. Jh. n.Chr.* (Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran, NF 4), Berlin, 1971, pp. 113-115.

⁹ Herodotus, *Hist.*, VII, 55.

¹⁰ H. Humbach and P. O. Skjærvø, *The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli*, Wiesbaden 1978-1983, 4 vols.

¹¹ Behramgore Tahmuraz Anklesaria and Dinshah D. Kapadia (eds.), *Pahlavi Vendidad (Zand-i Jvit-dev-dat)*, Bombay, 1949.

vehemently forbidden to every Zoroastrian, so that they developed their individual custom of getting corpses devoured by vultures. There are very depressing orders against the menstruation of women and some other customs.

But besides the restrictive customs against pollution there are also two very positive regulations. In the Zoroastrian books of *Vendidad*, *Bundahishn* and *Dinkard* we read that the best virtues of a Zoroastrian are to till the earth and to earn crops from it or to lead flocks of sheep and goats over the meadow, because they make the earth happy with their feet and hooves. Such agricultural and flockbreeding ways were encouraged and approved by the Zoroastrian religion. Thus Zoroastrian communities in Yazd and Kerman in Iran and in Gujerat in India developed into agricultural centres. The Parsis of India made their fortune with the cultivation of cotton, at first in sixteenth century, when they supplied the English with cotton and food for the arriving ships. Still now some Parsi merchants are known as Kings of Cotton.

It will be one important object of future research to collect more knowledge about the special Zoroastrian customs and methods of agricultural work. The existing handbooks are still quite insufficient in treating this aspect of Iranian culture. This research should be done very soon, before modernization and urbanization tends to destroy the old patterns of village life.

The love of nature among Iranian people can certainly be traced back to the most ancient texts, the *Gâthâs* of prophet Zarathustra. He puts many questions to Lord Ahura Mazda about nature: "Why is the sky turning around, why do the clouds move?..." (*Yasna* 44.4). And in the famous Gatha (*Yasna* 29) he puts the most profound words into the mouth of an animal, the "soul of the cow" (*g^eus urvân^em*). Modern Zoroastrian scholars have tried to "correct" the words of Zarathustra and have changed the word *gav*- "cow" to *gay*- "life",¹² because the metaphorical language of the prophet seems much too enigmatic to them. A European scholar never would dare to make such a serious manipulation to a well preserved text of such age and religious weight. But also in Europe there is a lot of discussion about the metaphorical meaning of the soul of the cow.

Well, as indicated by the last example, there remain unsolved many questions about the topic of Iranian attitudes to nature. The following are three:

1. Would Zoroastrians think there is still now some feeling preserved in your much civilized minds as members of an urbanized community, that you are protected by earth, plants, water - nature?
2. Do you preserve a solemn feeling of unity and correlation with nature when you enter a site like Pir-e Sabz or an Atash Bahram or Shah Warahram Izad?
3. Do you believe that from the earth beneath your feet there will proceed good luck and happiness to you, that a mountain like Pir-e Sabz has a soul?

¹² [At the Seminar a heated discussion developed over this, with Dr Vahidi rendering *gav*- "cow" into *gay*- "life", while the European standpoint was supported by Mr Partov. Eds.]