

2009

Zoroastrians on the Internet, a quiet social movement: Ethnography of a virtual community

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/1363773>

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ZOROASTRIANS ON THE INTERNET, A QUIET SOCIAL MOVEMENT:
ETHNOGRAPHY OF A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

by

Helen Gerth

Bachelor of Arts
Occidental College, Los Angeles
1991

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts Degree in Anthropology
Department of Anthropology
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
August 2009**

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ABSTRACT

Zoroastrians on the Internet, a Quiet Social Movement: Ethnography of a Virtual Community

by

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Zoroastrians today are a small but vibrant ethno-religious diaspora estimated at 130,000-258,000. They are members of the oldest monotheistic world religion originating in the Inner Asian steppes in approximately 1500 B.C. living as a religious minority in widely dispersed communities across the world. Increasingly they have turned to the Internet to discuss challenges of declining population, maintaining an ethno-religious identity, conversion, and intermarriage. The question grounding this research is how does this small ethno-religious minority maintain its boundaries and cohesion in the modern world? This study found that Zoroastrians maintain group boundaries and cohesion in the modern world, in part, through utilizing the Internet to provide resource sites, communities of affirmation, social networking resources, and through its function as a transmovement space facilitating face to face contact. It also explores the effectiveness of traditional ethnographic techniques applied to the Internet, or 'virtual' ethnography, as a primary data source for yielding an understanding of Zoroastrian inter- and intra-group dynamics within the continuing anthropological trend of multi-sited fieldwork. The following will summarize how some Zoroastrians have created and use over 100 websites, numerous email lists, YouTube videos, and the social networking site Z-book to shape contemporary Zoroastrian identity. It will examine how they translate Zoroastrian identity into a third diasporic wave into the virtual world and how the Internet has given greater visibility and 'voice' to minority opinions which, for the first time in over 3500 years, threaten to fragment the global Zoroastrian community.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Knowledge is relative & to arrive at the Truth (A-sha) one has to peel off one petal after another from the flower.

Nader Patel, 1-3-2009

No endeavor to deepen our knowledge and understanding of others is successful alone. Each conversation allows us to 'peel' back layers of perspective and experience and in so understanding each layer we hope to understand the construction of culture and practice, worldview and knowledge. From such vantage points, we can reexamine the whole and see as well its heart. My deepest thanks go to the many Zoroastrians who have selflessly given of their time to answer questions, correct misconceptions, and share their world with me. I am grateful for their encouragement and acceptance of my genuine interest rather than seeing me as a casual tourist in their world.

An anthropologist once commented that an ethnography without names becomes just a story. Yet, our respondents often share opinions that may be controversial and stories of personal trials and emotions closely held to their hearts. I have endeavored to strike a balance in the following paper as well as in my acknowledgements. Websites are public domain, and so I have not changed any site names or the names of their creators to give them the full credit due their time and energy invested in the process. The name of the Zoroastrian social networking site has been changed out of respect for the desire of those there to have a more private forum. It is an invitation only site, and I was generously extended one to better understand the diversity of a segment of the community. Several individuals graciously gave of their time to make suggestions and modifications in the development of the questions and topics used in the surveys and I would extend my deepest thanks here: Mr. Maneck Bhujwala, Dr. Dolly Dastoor, Dr. Jehan Bagli, Mr. Daraius Bharucha, Dr. Lovji Cama, Mr. Khojeste Mistree, Mrs. Roshan Rivetna, Mr. Freddy Mirza,

Mrs. Nawaz Merchant and Mr. Homi Gandhi, Mrs. Niloufer Bhesania, Dr. Niaz Kasravi, and Dr. Sam Vesuna as well as several others who shared their thoughts with some of these community members. Several other individuals involved in the discussions of what Zoroastrianism means and might become in the future also shared their perspectives and their time, thoughts, and assistance which is deeply appreciated: Khojeste Mistree, Dina McIntyre, Alexander Bard, and Ronald Delavega. I am also grateful for the wonderful images and personal family practice of Nowruz that Mobedyar Mehran Gheibi graciously shared with myself and those on the email list. Geve Narielwalla also deserves many thanks for allowing me to share several of his comments and images from his website about the renovations at the Iransha Atash Behram.

Many have asked how I came to be interested in this small community; it is often from small moments and passing comments that our worlds changed. Such is indeed the case here for without the help of my lifelong friend, Tom Utiger, during a casual conversation to find a subject that combined many of my interests I would not have come to know of the Zoroastrian community. I also would not have met Dr. Jamsheed Choksy at Indiana University who has shared so much of his time and knowledge providing me an introduction to members of the community as well as making generous comments on the proofs of the surveys and paper. For this and his encouragement and collegiality I am deeply in his debt. I would also thank Professor J.R. Hinnells at Liverpool Hope University for sharing his expertise and research experiences in the midst of a busy schedule as well as Ms. Gillian Towler Mehta for sharing her UK Zoroastrian Survey 2003 and allowing me to incorporate some of her questions into this survey.

The support of a student's committee and committee chair is invaluable, and I would be remiss if I did not thank each of them for their insights, comments, and encouragement: Dr. William Jankowiak, my committee chair, who has unfailingly encouraged my development as an independent thinker and academic as well as his patience as I navigated the process; Drs. Alan Simmons, Gary Palmer, and Robert Futrell who have all lent their individual perspectives and expertise through this long process and Dr. Choksy for agreeing to serve as an outside committee member. To Drs. Reza Torkzadeh, Jerry Chang, and Darren Denenberg of the University of Nevada Las Vegas I owe an enormous debt for their constant support and

willingness to listen to me talk long and often about roadblocks, frustrations, and discoveries as well as for their assistance on the technical aspects of building surveys, websites and the technological eccentricities of computer software. While anthropology is not their specialty, they shared their enthusiasm of learning and individual gifts without which there were times I would have felt the finish line was beyond my grasp. A very dear friend, Will Wilreker, shared this process with me both in his own research on his thesis and in supporting me through my own journey in synthesizing and writing all that I have learned. He spent many an evening sitting and prodding me through writer's block and probing my statements and theoretical development so that others could make sense of what I had discovered and continue to challenge and hone them. I am forever grateful for his assistance and friendship.

To my family I don't know if I can ever adequately express my love and gratitude for their support. My daughters endured many evenings of a distracted mother trying to progress through classes to reach the data collection and writing of the thesis. Throughout the last three years of research culminating in this thesis my daughter, Rachel Harr, has always let me know that no matter how much time I had to spend away she loved me no less. For her love and her often expressed pride in me I can never say enough how much I am grateful and how much I love her. My fiancé, Albert Carinio has cheerfully listened through hours of stories and served as a sounding board for each new idea. I love him for all the countless hours he willingly gave away so that I could work and for taking an interest in my research.

Every individual I have interacted with has been invaluable to helping me shape my thoughts on the impact of the Internet on the Zoroastrian community. There are many that have discussed and posted that I have not named and have met briefly, they also have my enduring gratitude. Any errors or misunderstandings are mine alone, and I look forward to continuing to learn more about the Zoroastrian community's worldview and evolution of culture and practice.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Group solidarity and identity are never static boundaries but are subjected daily to forces that reshape, diminish, or reinforce the lines between 'self' and 'the other', 'us' and 'them'. Increasingly, scholars have discussed how the Internet allows exploration of identity and experimentation in identity formation producing a force for heterogeneity in today's connected world which may contribute to breaking down affiliations and ascribed group and individual identity (2008, Hine 2000, Jones 1995, Markham 1998, Rheingold 1993, Shields 1996, Turkle 1995). Two of the strongest factors in maintaining the integrity of a group's identity are ethnicity and religion. An ethno-religious identity thus is encased in the strongest possible borders of religion and blood ties. When one considers that religious communities stay together three times longer than groups utilizing other bonding criteria (Zablocki 1980), the utilization of the Internet by religious communities assumes a heavy significance in terms of its effect on their identity and cohesion and resulting impact on the societies they are embedded in. How do these forces interact to strengthen and/or weaken one's sense of self and place in a community and the world?

The social sciences are in good agreement that group solidarity can be based on several factors such as shared language, ethnicity, religion, cultural practices, and kinship ties. Fragmentation and gradual assimilation are both signaled and driven by factors such as immigration, intermarriage, and language loss (Baumann 1996, Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, Fenggang and Ebaugh 2001, Hinton 1994, Waters 1990). The Zoroastrian community, believed by scholars to be the oldest monotheistic religion in the world, is acutely aware of these forces of change, fragmentation, and assimilation (Boyce 2004, Mistree 1982). Historically grounded in Persian ethnic identity as followers of the prophet Zarathushtra, this ethno-religious, global Diaspora of approximately 130,000-258,000 faces conflicting calls for renewed purity of ethnicity

and religious conviction, conversion, and intermarriage to combat declining population and assimilation. The question grounding this research is how does this small ethno-religious minority maintain its boundaries and cohesion in the modern world? The emerging body of research looking at the Internet's impact on identity and group boundaries is also beginning to look more closely at religion's use of the Internet as sacred space to strengthen religious identity. This study draws upon the Internet as both a resource tool and field site itself for identifying salient cultural features such as religious beliefs, practice, and ethnicity to better understand the degree to which the Internet supports the group solidarity, or identity, of this global ethno-religious Diaspora. It also looks closely at how the Internet provides a forum for minority, dissenting voices within the community normally muted by the weight of geographic isolation and historical tradition and orthodoxy, giving them louder voices and visibility which contributes to fragmentation of the global Zoroastrian community.

There are various diaspora and religious groups with sites on the Internet where one might explore the theoretical and parametrical issues of identity and the Internet; however, the Zoroastrian use of the Internet illustrates the complexities of diaspora and religious identity as well as the intricate process of maintaining an ethno-religious identity in a diaspora. Zoroastrians exhibit an intense commitment to their heritage and beliefs that, to date, lack the fundamentalist drive to change society around them by force or political lobbying to protect the boundaries of identity. They work within their societal environment contributing to industry and charity rather than insisting on accommodation and legal protection. In a world where religious fundamentalism periodically breaks into physical violence against 'non-believers' and fundamental religious groups lobby to pass specific agendas, the Zoroastrians' ability to be so passionately committed to revitalization and preservation without such actions is important to understand. Lastly, the Zoroastrian community both on and offline highlights the nuances of identity, the dynamic between individual and collective identity, and social movements in diffuse, non-institutional contexts. Establishing the parameters of Zoroastrian Internet use is the first step to better understanding how changes in the community are creating a movement that is attempting to disassociate ethnicity from religious identity.

Religious movements and ritual hold a continuous fascination for anthropologists. The human ability to organize around specific belief systems carries enormous implications for understanding the relationship between ideas and associations, metaphor and symbolism as communication and community, ritual practices, identity, and the dialectic between the individual and the collective. These belief systems coalesce around core concepts such as ethnicity and religion that groups utilize to shape their social world and networks deciding group membership. So great is the need for a unique identity that history is punctuated by acts that reach beyond group boundaries to reshape by force the social fabric and identity of others. This is witnessed in such acts of genocide as the mass killings of the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994, extreme acts of fundamentalism as seen in the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and the release of sarin gas in a Tokyo subway on March 20, 1995 as well as in less visible forms of repression and coercion (Armstrong 2001, Cabestrero 1986, Faubion 2001, Gold 1994, Hinton 2002, Juergensmeyer 2001, Taylor 2002). What arises from these extreme expressions of need to protect identity is the imperative to understand the processes that are used to create and maintain it, to negotiate the concept of 'self' embedded in the collective as well as its transcendent qualities. The virtual world of the Internet is an avenue for religious groups to strengthen identity and revitalize belief and tradition. It is also a place for individuals to explore and experiment with their understanding of the sacred. This paper draws on the developing studies of online religion (Campbell 2005a, Campbell 2005b) and the rich, growing corpus of virtual ethnography – i.e. adopting traditional ethnographic methods to an online environment - to focus on the global Zoroastrian community's use of online resources to revitalize its members sense of belonging to a rich ethos and cultural inheritance within a widely spread Diaspora.

Unlike many religious sites online, the Zoroastrian community does not utilize the Internet as sacred space, but rather the Internet is both a tool and place¹ to explore hotly debated, competing views within the community. It is the contention of this study that Zoroastrians maintain group boundaries and cohesion in the modern world, in part, *through utilizing the Internet to provide resource sites, communities of affirmation, social networking, and through its function as a transmovement space facilitating face to face contact*². This is done through over 100 websites,

67 Yahoo! groups developed by Zoroastrian individuals and associations, assorted videos on YouTube, and Z-book as well as membership on other social networking sites such as Orkut and Facebook. The Internet thus becomes a place for members of a community in transition to debate and negotiate the currents and consequences of that transition through redefining both individual and group identity. In this way it moves the Zoroastrian community forward as a practicing, dynamic world view. Secondly and perhaps most significantly, the Internet has paradoxically been responsible for the growth of variant groups. So strong online has become the voice for a universal religion that encompasses proselytizing and large scale conversions that it threatens to split the physical, offline community. This is driven by contemporary Zoroastrianism's strong divergence from the linkage of religion and ethnicity as a crucial, defining component of Zoroastrian identity. This is fed by revitalization efforts incorporating traditional media and online resources that have increased the visibility of this relatively small group- some say as small as 130,000³, some of approximately 280,000 worldwide (Rivetna 2002). This increased visibility coupled with a rapid and large influx of those of the Irani Diaspora and individuals choosing to reclaim their Zoroastrian heritage in places such as Tajikistan has created both enormous strain and the perception of strain on the supportive social structures of this vibrant and resilient group. This may manifest in the concerns of some that 'non-Zoroastrians' will take advantage of their religion through claiming membership to use the charities, housing, and obtaining visas for example. Using several online field sites to present an ethnographic narrative of multiple Zoroastrian voices, this study explores the ways that virtual space has provided opportunities for dialogue in a fluid environment that fosters what some see as change and others as further challenge to a distinct birthright. This virtual space has taken on a life of its own and has allowed previously muted voices to insert themselves and expand dialogue over how to strengthen Zoroastrian identity by seeking to redefine it.

The Zoroastrian community faces a variety of challenges: shrinking numbers; shifting demographics; preservation of Zoroastrian identity as a minority Diaspora within Muslim, Hindu and Christian majorities; declining numbers of practicing priests within a hereditary priesthood model; intermarriage; changes in funerary rites⁴; and even global warming that threatens the

current location of the Holy Fire in the Atash Behram in Udvada, India as the sea steadily encroaches (Dastoor 2008). These challengers stress a community thinly dispersed across five continents and dependent on a web of family and community connections and priest-led ritual. These are all central topics of online discussion and contribute to establishing the boundaries of Zoroastrian community online much the same way that Guimarães (2008) uses networks of social relationships and shared meanings to trace group boundaries.

Social networks of mutual obligation, friendship, and responsibility are central to the concepts of community. Achieving a dynamic and thriving community rests, I believe, on the ability to maintain a firm sense of self and a sense of group membership which nourishes connections between members. Strengthening a sense of inclusion within a group that holds similar world views is part of creating a unique identity that, shared with others, communicates 'who' you are and what you believe in. Collective and individual identities in turn play a crucial role in how individuals prioritize obligations and shape their emotional and cognitive appraisals of their roles in the social fabric.

The first impression of the Zoroastrian community on websites is one of relative cohesiveness. The Zoroastrian community, faced with conflicts of interest between 'traditionalist' and 'modernist' forces for over 100 years has nevertheless remained unified in their objective to maintain their identity and preserve their cultural heritage (Nigosian 1996) united by the awareness of their vulnerability in small numbers, especially Irani Zoroastrians who exist at the Islamic government's sufferance. This study has found that the Internet has strengthened groups within the global Zoroastrian community; paradoxically, in doing so, the Internet has also contributed to the development of divergent streams of ideological thought weakening the overall community. In solidifying extreme positions, it has also left those in the middle proud of their heritage but withdrawn from debates on burning issues that have far reaching impacts.

Where beliefs are strongly held, where there is a movement for change there is an equally strong countermovement to re-anchor community affiliations, traditions, and identity. At the most liberal end of this current for change is a move to 'restore' a 'universal' religion open to all that might possibly redirect a portion of the community and their attention outward for societal change

rather than inward on building Zoroastrian charities and community. It has derived impetus from the strength of traditional Zoroastrianism against change and compromise which began to surface in India with the success of the community. The rise of successful Parsi businessmen and women necessitated frequent travel and demands that made observance of purity laws and other ritual more difficult (Boyce 2004, Choksy 1989). This movement for change is seen by its architects as a move to 'restore' the 'pristine' religion to return to the original words of Zarathustra in the Gathas as the core and strip away the accumulation of centuries of human imposed rituals, restrictions, and demands. This desire for change arising from firm and inflexible boundaries of identity has in turn fueled a strong reaction to strengthen the link of ethnicity and religious belief as a core of Zoroastrian identity by orthodox and ultra orthodox members. It has given rise to increased civic responsibility and activity for control of community resources for example in India and establishments of religious schools to support young priests and encourage them to enter the priesthood instead of a secular profession. This dynamic cycle has continued relatively unchanged until recently with the advent of the Internet and the outlet it has created for marginal voices. What appears to be emerging is an online community that is strongly polarized over contentious issues with a large online membership that appears in the membership counts but is not necessarily visible in postings. They form rather a silent group that utilizes the Internet for following debates and general information on the achievements of and events affecting Zoroastrians worldwide.

I would introduce here the idea that some Zoroastrians on the Internet are involved in a 'quiet' social movement. Like many involving fundamentalist religious perspectives, traditional/historical groups feel threatened and react strongly to preserve their identity. Community debates are often filled with passionate words and criticisms that prove disruptive to meetings and distressingly negative for members involved. In this sense, it is not quiet which the following discussion will show. However, I would establish at this early point that 'quiet' is a very apt term to highlight the unique and signature hallmark of Zoroastrians – they do not seek to reconfigure the social fabric around them to seek protection. It is a quiet movement for change that does not use violence or politics to create safe space for practicing their beliefs and to isolate their youth from other beliefs

or practices. This stems largely I believe from a sense of exile for many – there is a need often expressed to protect those that remain in Iran from the wrath and persecution of an Islamic theocracy. The original conditions of settlement in India also contributed as the Hindu rulers were concerned that Zoroastrian refugees would seek to convert and lure away Hindus and were reassured by the religious leaders that such was not the case. It remains to be seen if the push to open the religion to conversion and active conversion activities by controversial individuals with highly visible websites will change this.

Strongly traditional Zoroastrians hold that only those born of two Zoroastrian parents and having had a proper navjote performed by a legitimate holder of the priesthood may claim to be a Zoroastrian. Any who claim otherwise are considered 'deformists' and 'pretenders'. There are numerous sites that put forth a more liberal definition. With these divergent presentations and ideologies present on the web, it is necessary to utilize a definition of Zoroastrian *community* in this study that will encompass these divergent perspectives. Keeping in mind the above distinctions as well as communal, online disagreements over issues as the nature of Ahura Mazda (god), the founder Zarathushtra's status as prophet or sage, conversion, and the place of an ethno-religious identity in defining Zoroastrian identity, for the purposes of this study *Zoroastrian community* is defined as *all those who follow the teachings of Zarathushtra⁵, ascribe to the worldview presented in his teachings, and self identify as Zoroastrian*. In this way there were no presupposed or set limits on identity or assumptions of the importance or influence of one group over another within the Zoroastrian community. This study covers a range of belief from orthodox to liberal, addresses the views of those of Zoroastrian ancestry for whom religion is part of their blood heritage and those who have converted to follow the debate as Zoroastrians map out who they will become.

This study maintains that the Internet impacts Zoroastrian identity through the development of resource sites, communities of affirmation, social networking sites, and its function as a transmovement space. It is necessary here to take a moment and briefly define these functions. Resource sites are primarily web pages. Other online arenas such as social networking sites and electronic email groups may also serve this function, but not as a primary purpose. Zoroastrian

websites serve to disseminate, preserve, and perpetuate communal knowledge of Zoroastrian heritage, belief, and culture. These resources may include but are not limited to uploaded files of the sacred texts known as the Avesta⁶, news articles about the accomplishments of and events affecting Zoroastrians around the world, audio recordings of prayers and songs, pictures of various Fire Temples and other heritage sites, various items for purchase (religious implements, clothes, books, videos etc.), archives of cultural articles on archaeology and history, liturgical calendars, religious ceremonies such as navjotes and jashans, and descriptions of numerous religious holiday practices. Lacking a central, authoritative author there are variations in the descriptions of some observances and doctrine. This begs the question of accuracy, an issue at the heart of the discussion of Zoroastrian identity, as many of the variations stem from differences in ideology that dictates the substance of canonical text and the substance and degree of ritual observance. Websites and other online communication is largely a place where communal opinions and understandings of Zoroastrian history and culture are presented and recorded. With an acknowledge paucity of scholarly activity and references it should be kept in mind that presentations are shaped and at times distorted by 'popular' history and practice and is something that will be remarked on in Chapter IV.

Communities of affirmation provide a safe haven where people of similar viewpoints may freely express passionately held beliefs in a supportive atmosphere. Yahoo! groups function disproportionately as communities of affirmation; some websites also serve this function though most do not. These sites allow isolated individuals and small groups to interact with the global Zoroastrian community. They also paradoxically are sites for emotional exchanges on doctrine, elections, and related events. Each event presents an opportunity to revisit differences and thus potentially change the social fabric of obligations and hierarchy of authority. Communities of affirmation are not always the same as collective identity. It is argued that they allow the development of collective identity for segments of the Zoroastrian community-i.e. orthodox, liberal, reformist- rather than the global community as a whole. Most importantly, more than their ability to promote group solidarity for those of similar ideological views, they allow isolated opinion

to become internal social movements. Hence the very opportunity for solidarity can be turned to a force of fragmentation.

Social network(ing) (SNSs) sites are comparable to virtual towns. Boyd and Ellison (2007) define them as:

...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile with a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

(Boyd and Ellison, pg. 2)

The first point emphasizes the opportunity for identity construction as the profile is a visual, textual, and sometimes audio display that reflects the individual's sense of themselves through direct representations and/or by drawing on imagery and metaphors that are deemed to reflect an impressionistic collage of interests and self-reflections. This is directly relevant to identity building through, what some scholars refer to as the 'immersive' quality of the Internet. "These systems are based on the objective to construct multi-modal and immersive interaction experiences for intuitive and entertaining information browsing." (Lopez-Gulliver, Sommerer, and Mignonneau 2002:pg.2) These multi-modal, or multiple sensory, interactions through visual and audio features thus allow participants to gather 'intuitive' and 'entertaining' information about ourselves and others on the forum. Many of the features of these sites and applications can be linked to create what social scientists have labeled "ambient awareness" (Thompson 2008). This awareness is created by an accumulation of minutia of constant updates of what friends change on their profiles, new friends they have made and other events that create a digital social intimacy- a closeness of community and friendships. For the purposes of this study, Z-book and the Kuwait Zoroastrian Association function as social networking sites that develop digital social intimacy- preferentially with other Zoroastrians. In this more intimate level of interaction SNSs are vehicles where social capital⁷ is used to acquire goods, services, assistance, engage in debate, share information on Zoroastrian social events, and cultivate friendships. In this way they function as communities of affirmation; however, often there are several self affirming groups within a social network and opposing views may break into heated expressions of disagreements. As

such these sites are considered variants of what I define as communities of affirmation and have been treated separately.

Trans-movement spaces are defined as those that, "...offer opportunities to draw otherwise unconnected local actors and networks together into broader webs..." of social networks in space with reduced social restrictions and boundaries (Futrell and Simi 2004, pg. 16). This space is especially important for marginalized groups as it is removed from the control of the dominant social group; as such a 'free space', the Internet has been a boon to subaltern communities, far-flung Diaspora groups, socially marginalized religions such as Wiccans and Pagans, and intentional communities such as White Power groups. Virtual space is used to encourage and/or actually coordinate face-to-face meetings as well as sustain links of communication and support between meetings when they are not possible. Collective identity is created and sustained through social ties and cultural practices. The Internet, as a transmovement space, strengthens social ties and contributes to a sense of revitalization that increases visibility and knowledge of unique cultural practices including religious beliefs thus contributing to collective identity. Communities of affirmation, resource sites, and social networking sites all have components that allow the Internet to function as a transmovement space. These operate in both public and private domains. They may consist of offers of employment, dating sites, public announcements of events and conferences. They may also serve to connect family members in remote places through postings of videos, online chat, pictures of life events and stories as well as reunite friends and missing family members through directories, profiles, and public appeals to assistance in locating such members. In this way we can better understand the transformative power of the Internet in building intentional communities and identity. In seeing the Internet as a transmovement space with its incorporated sense of 'free' and 'safe' space, we can think about how collective identity and individual identity are crafted and how this might lead to understanding shifts in group perception that may fuel internal social movements for change.

This thesis is, most importantly, the story of the Zoroastrians in their own words. Chapter II addresses the methodology used to define the field site and engage the Zoroastrian community. Participant observation via chat rooms, discussion boards, and electronic email lists is outlined in

detail as it is utilized for this research. Chapter III will briefly examine research on Zoroastrian use of the Internet to provide a longitudinal understanding of the community online, and will look at current literature on core concepts such as virtual ethnography, culture, community, virtual community, identity, online religion, and diaspora to define the boundaries of the terminology to be used and a theoretical context for understanding the data. Online participant observation in chat rooms and other venues on the Internet also are compared to more traditional methods to understand the benefits and possible drawbacks. Chapter IV is a brief overview of their rich history and an introduction to historical beliefs and the variations of ideology and emergent, contemporary Zoroastrian worldviews that are diverging from the community's historical focus on cultural heritage as identity. This is done through ethnographic narrative drawn from the 'voices' of websites, Yahoo! email groups and personal communications. Chapter V then addresses the thesis of this study that the Internet has become a forum to link widely separated Zoroastrian communities and individuals, yet also is causing rifts in the global community. This is being caused by the easy availability of the Internet to any who choose to utilize it. One consequence of this that will be explored is the highly communal nature of the material presented. Another is the variations of definitions of 'Zoroastrian' and the theology and practices described. It is a narrative as portrayed online of the adaptation of present day Zoroastrians as they seek to balance their beliefs with modern demands on their sense of who they are and the foundation and future they would pass on to their youth. Chapter VI considers the implications of the data for the future trajectory of the Zoroastrian community. It will examine how the Internet is playing a strong role in assisting in efforts of revitalization against the fragmenting and assimilating forces of diaspora and modernity; additionally it will examine the role it plays in a movement by some for change and diversity of practice and ideology toward a universal religion, still with the aim of revitalizing the religion. In a sense it will be described as another wave of the Zoroastrian Diaspora into the virtual world.

Online religion has received minimal attention thus far (Campbell 2005b), and so one of the aims of this study is to add to the current body of knowledge of the experiences of an ethno-religious minority in maintaining the continuity of their millennia old religion using the Internet.

How do Zoroastrians utilize online resources to construct trans-national bonds of religion through preserving ritual language, continuity of practice, accepted standards for temples, and ritual clothing for example amidst the diaspora, and are their approaches unique? It is also offered as a modest addition to understanding developing trends in virtual communities, developing patterns in world religions through Diaspora, and the anthropology of communication and cyberspace.

The greatest barometer of the accuracy and usefulness of a study in many ways is the degree to which those interviewed see themselves in it and find it useful. It is the intent of this research then to provide the community with a rich, comprehensive perspective on what resources they are currently using and how they fit into the context of current community discussions on controversial topics such as intermarriage and conversion as well as how Zoroastrians are forging links through conferences and events. If so, it will offer the community a tool in understanding and using the Internet to assist in their search to preserve their unique cultural and religious identity.

¹ Here 'tool and place' is used as defined by Markham (Markham, A. N. 1998. *Life online: researching real experience in virtual space*. New York: Alta Mira Press..

² It should be kept in mind that this works in tandem with efforts offline by individuals, associations, and local communities that encourage communal observances, activities, holidays and other events designed to strengthen the community.

³ This number references specifically those who define Zoroastrian within strictly ethno-religious parameters.

⁴ "Burial practices" might seem the more logical and neutral term of reference. However, Khojeste Mistree, a strong traditionalist and respected member within more traditional segments of the community suggested to me in an email that this presupposes placing the body in the ground. This is not acceptable in Zoroastrian practice except where no dakhmas (burial Towers of Silence) exist and certain pre-conditions such as concrete lined coffins are used. Cremation is a controversial means of 'burial' as it would place 'druj' into an element that is regarded as holy and pure. "Funerary Practices" has therefore been adopted as a more suitable phrase for both the online survey and subsequent references in keeping with Zoroastrian beliefs.

⁵ "Asho" translates as 'Righteous One' (personal communication) and is a term of respect often placed in front of the prophet Zarathushtra's name. (proper usage as communicated in both emails on groups and personal communications).

⁶ The Avesta is comprised of the Gathas and later accretions of knowledge and liturgical importance. The language and the book are distinguished by referring to the former as Avestan and the later as the Avesta. The Gathas are written in an even more ancient language referred to as Gathic.

⁷ Putnam in *Bowling Alone* offers a well presented discussion of both the history of and impacts of social capital for understanding social structure in such roles as 'bonding' and 'bridging' pg. 19-25.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

Research Design, Goals, Intent

The approach adopted was an interpretive rather than quantitative framework seeking to capture a holistic impression of multiple experiences and meanings for a wide variety of Zoroastrian Internet users. This was contextualized within their perceptions of the Internet either as tool or community, and the value they perceive in their Internet use. Value here may be neutral and be as simple as the usefulness they find in being able to communicate easily across distances and find information when needed. It may also be strongly defined in perceptions of negative and positive impacts of online presence in building or tearing down a global collective identity for themselves and the general Zoroastrian community. Considering the relative paucity of research specifically on Internet use by Zoroastrians, this was an exploratory study. Initially an online survey was developed to capture quantitative data, but its design proved to be more appropriate for a long term study. The primary data collection process became online participant observation and interviews.

The purpose of this study is to map out Zoroastrian Internet use and begin to determine and understand its effect on Zoroastrian identity. Clear benchmarks were set towards understanding how the Internet was affecting the boundaries of individuals' internal maps of identity and Zoroastrian community cohesiveness.

- Identify Internet resources available and which resources were favored i.e. newsgroups, websites, blog groups like Yahoo!, or social networking sites.
- Gain an understanding as far as possible of the demographics of Zoroastrian users, Parsi/Irani vs. convert, orthodox vs. liberal, and Zoroastrian sites vs. general sites.

A brief note on the use of *Irani* is necessary here. Irani may refer to Iranian Zoroastrians including those who have emigrated from Iran to the West and Iranian Zoroastrian immigrants to the Indian

subcontinent in the 17th-19th centuries⁸. As I have used it above - 'Parsi/Irani'- it refers specifically to the self reference term preferred by many Parsi individuals, among them Khojeste Mistree - a well respected leader of the Zoroastrians in India also known as Parsis, who use it to stress Zoroastrianism's identity rooted in birthright. The second benchmark addresses issues of representativeness and the users' and site architects' agendas. This was sought to add depth and complexity to the interpretation of the data as far as time permitted in the data gathering process.⁹ From this secondary benchmark is set the goal of fleshing out the structure of the Zoroastrian community online to capture the most ephemeral and illusive of subjects in trying to trace the borders of identity. What aspects of identity are presented online as defining 'true' Zoroastrians and the direction the global community should take to strengthen membership? Which points of view within the community determine such definitions for different subgroups of Zoroastrians? To gain insight into these questions we must identify the topics of debate and identify areas of agreement. Is ethnicity as well as practice still a core value? What exactly is encompassed within a name be it Zoroastrian, Zarathushti, or neo-Zoroastrian among some of the terms of identity being used on and offline. As mentioned earlier, ethnicity and religion have become strong factors influencing group cohesion, so measures of ethnic and religious identity also needed to be identified and measured as far as possible.

Numerous questions arose throughout the course of this study, and at times gently shifted the directions and methods in a constantly evolving process. Many were basic issues:

- Does the technology represent a socially constructed space that is the same for developers and users?
- Do websites and groups promote discussion across viewpoints? What services are offered and how do they impact identity?
- Is there a single, cohesive image of Zoroastrianism presented across the Internet or a variety of images and definitions?
- What is Zoroastrian identity as presented by Zoroastrians for the Zoroastrian community's consumption and what is that as presented by Zoroastrians for those who are not?
- Is it necessary to differentiate, if a difference exists, between offline and online identity?

The final two items above require a brief clarification. One respondent interpreted this to mean that there were 'two faces' being presented and that this would be very 'unZoroastrian'. I have found that Information presented on resource or web sites for Zoroastrians is at times slightly different than that for those outside the community in content as well as emphasis. In no way, however, should this be taken to suggest that Zoroastrians are chameleons. I have found that those I spoke with are very clear about their positions and reiterate these in both online venues as well as offline in lectures and presentations. What I refer to is rather the 'professional' face that is put on for visitors which focuses on the accomplishments and beauty of the culture and faith. What is discussed for and with those within the community, however, more often focuses on the content of current debates.

Three points of discussion focused the many questions that arose:

1. Does the toolkit of online resources help create social networks?
2. How is the Internet providing avenues for local and global communities to share resources and communicate?
3. How does the Internet shape and reshape the boundaries of Zoroastrian historical identity; how does it chart a path of transition into the future as they navigate shifting layers of ethnicity, religion, nationality, and Diaspora membership?

The conclusion to these questions was, as stated in the introduction, that Zoroastrian sites function as resource sites, transmovement spaces, communities of affirmation, and social networking sites. These all offer avenues for Zoroastrians to create a living, online history that is used to strengthen cohesiveness and so identity within the competing voices of Zoroastrian perspectives on defining tenets. It also has created social spaces for dissent between these groups, for the first time threatening the global community with a lasting split that may result in a Zoroastrianism that has two significantly different faces perceived by those outside where one group will not accept the other as a 'true' Zoroastrian.

Foundational Premises

There are several premises that were taken from a review of current literature and initial discussions with several Zoroastrians and used to develop the methodology and approach to this

study. These premises defined perspectives on the feasibility of the study and hypothetical results and so need to be clearly stated here and will be revisited in the conclusion:

- Online communities are legitimate, if transient, communities
- A virtual Zoroastrian community or communities exists
- The Internet is both a field site for ethnographic inquiry and a tool for ethnographic interviews.
- The Internet is a unifying/supporting influence on subgroups within the community, and a divisive influence on the global Zoroastrian community.

In order to research Zoroastrian community on the Internet, one has to believe that there is indeed such a social construct. Current literature on the evolution of social science theory, and specifically anthropological theory, regarding community suggested that community is indeed achievable within certain parameters or measures online. Several measures were chosen to show that there were social networks being created online. Some of these were evidence of development of friendships, development of obligations reflected in individuals organizing events and public activism, calls for financial or other assistance, services offered such as job postings, and shared interests.

Next, initial research indicated a large network of websites with a variety of services thus suggesting there was a large enough presence to evaluate the degree of Zoroastrian community online. As I was questioning the ways Zoroastrians were using the Internet to stay better connected, it seemed that to reach the users of the sites, it was most effective to develop a mechanism to assess the opinions of users as they entered the virtual community. This prompted several questions as to the validity of the Internet as a field site such as representivity, bias, and legitimacy of the identity of those I would talk with online. One of the draws of the Internet is one's ability to assume any identity. Online researchers, however, indicated that these difficulties were infrequent and/or could be monitored (Hine 2000, Mann and Stewart 2004). One example would be of data that might be skewed by those who were not Zoroastrian but chose to communicate with me and/or take the questionnaire as if they were. Informed consent and obtaining legitimate parental approval from respondents to the questionnaires was another issue of concern.

Anonymity can also become a drawback in controversial events as individuals can hide their identity by posting inflammatory comments anonymously.

My initial conclusions were that I would find that the Internet could and was being used by the Zoroastrian community in various ways to establish stronger ties, and I hoped to prove, a creation of a web of global networks that was drawing the *global* community into a single entity with a general agreement on vision and practice. What I discovered and discuss in more detail in Chapters five and six is that this is only partially true.

Challenges, Limitations, Revelations

Some of the challenges and limitations were consistent with those to be further discussed in evaluating virtual ethnography as a viable field site and methodology in Chapter three. In general terms, the Internet has what I will refer to as ‘soft’ boundaries. Without physical limitations of a town, neighborhood, country, or tribe the virtual world offers the researcher the seemingly infinite possibilities of voices, perspectives and an unlimited knowledge base to investigate. As other researchers have found, these soft boundaries allow for an overwhelming amount of data, so they have to be carefully limited and defined (Guimarães Jr. 2008 , Hine 2000, Hine 2008). Asynchronous communication and reliance on text without body language and emotive feedback sometimes created misunderstandings that required lengthy email discussions and added to response times. In some cases, time constraints limited the opportunities for actual face to face contact which would have allowed the development of trust and a working relationship to be reached more quickly.

While the topic of Zoroastrian identity is an active topic in the community and there was strong support from individuals at the outset, getting online survey links on websites will take more time and interaction with individuals and associations. The inconvenience of the length of the online survey was to be mitigated by allowing individuals to sign in with a unique username and password to answer the survey in modules; however, the host site – SurveyMonkey - only allowed this option if the individual was sent a personal invitation. This became clear after there had already been a significant investment in time and financial resources. Concerns for respondent privacy and anonymity prompted me to leave the online survey as a single

questionnaire to be completed at one visit. With such a limited set of respondents, self selection is something to be carefully considered until more responses can be gathered and supplemented with interviews and/or questionnaires from individuals whom do not use or rarely use the Internet. The online survey then is being continued to gather further responses. The primary source of user perspectives was dialogue exchanged on three Yahoo! groups and social networking sites.

A list of websites was developed both to identify virtual field sites to examine Zoroastrian statements of belief, practice, and identity and sources to elicit assistance in making the online surveys visible to the community. The list of sites was limited to English language sites. As the study progressed, I became aware of an increasing number of Persian language sites in Iran that are accessed by the Iranian community. It should be noted that, due to requests, one Persian language site Amordad has created a duplicate site in English. They will be primary sources to gain an understanding of the Irani Zoroastrian community in the future, and it will be interesting to note if other Persian language sites also create alternate sites in English. These sites, it is hoped, will offer a better understanding of the links between Diaspora communities and those that remain in Iran. The Kerman Zoroastrian Association site, based in Kerman, Iran is in Persian yet 63.5% of the users are from the United States (alexa.com: 2-09) indicating support for the Internet as an avenue for the strong desire for immigrants to stay connected to their homeland. Currently, I have not identified any Gujarati language sites based in India; this is an area for further study.

Building a list of sites was only part of the challenge of defining the Zoroastrian community's online toolkit. Criteria also needed to be determined for addressing issues of scope, representativeness, and executability of the protocol. Websites are the most visible and so the most obvious focus. As Hine (2000) reminds us, the worldwide web is less bounded than newsgroups. This allows for a variety of hyper-textual relationships between interlinked sites and the creation of a web of connections. They consist of individual pages that are an expression of the developer(s) perspectives and create a relationship between author and audience allowing the developer(s) to narrate their story directly to the user. This stresses the importance of understanding how webmaster/moderator goals and identity correspond to users. Neither works in a vacuum but in a synergistic, dynamic weaving supplying the driving force of growth online –

those who do not agree or don't find their needs met and cannot have a part in the narrative will develop their own site or list to share their story, goals and perspectives. The following is a small list of core points that needed to be defined in the development of the online surveys:

Webmasters/Moderators:

- Identify their definition of 'Zoroastrian'
- Identify the purpose in establishing the sites and lists
- Identify key features and services visitors are using
- Identify features and services visitors would like to see on the sites (if possible)
- Identify the user base if possible (Zoroastrian, non-Zoroastrian)
- Identify volume of usage if possible to measure site/ list popularity
- Identify why users use the Internet vs. a physical locality for resources and/or discussions

Users:

- Define what they mean by "Zoroastrian"
- Identify users general Internet usage & Zoroastrian site usage for comparison
- Identify what users see as community concerns
- Identify user perspectives of the Internet and Zoroastrian sites: tool, place, living space/sacred space
- Identify general demographics of users
- What do users say vs. what do they do on and offline

Internet:

- What were viable methods of disseminating surveys, communicating with users

Websites are not the only outlet for Zoroastrian voices. A stronger connection with the community online was sought and it was found in Yahoo! groups which offered a more interactive forum. The focus on groups for access on exchanges of views and as a forum to voice frustrations and emotional responses to events within the global community allowed for more traditional ethnographic methods of interviews and observation. These too offered a limited outlet of text, links, and limited images. As the research progressed, YouTube was brought to my attention from links in group postings and Z-book and the Kuwait Zoroastrian Association from

personal invitations from acquaintances made on Yahoo! groups. These offered rich insight into social networking among Zoroastrians outside of discussions focusing on religion.

A review of the literature for qualitative research techniques and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) on use of the Internet in virtual ethnography and research indicates that using both online techniques and face to face interviews and participant observation methods provides both a richer, more contextually accurate and informed data set and allows for greater range and opportunity for participants to express their opinions and influence the research outcomes (Etzioni and Etzioni 1999, James and Busher 2006, Mann and Stewart 2004, Seymour 2001) Some argue that this is not necessarily so (Jankowski and van Selm 2008). However, since I believe that unlike a case study of a fully online environment like The Palace (Guimarães Jr. 2008) or avatars on MySpace for example, studies of an ethno-religious group and identity rely heavily on an integrated sense of identity on and offline. A comprehensive study of Zoroastrian virtual community must then recognize the increased richness of an integrated methodology.

This theoretical perspective guided initial planning for conducting the data gathering in phases utilizing an online survey, participant observation, and traditional face to face interviews. The online survey phase of the research was an integral component of the original methodology. Most importantly, it was the vehicle to directly address those who utilize these websites and are building online Zoroastrian identity. The format provided a baseline for identifying underlying patterns and attitudes toward who is a Zoroastrian online. It was designed to gather the what, who, when, where, and why of site usage to compare to usage of non Zoroastrian sites and further identify areas of inquiry or clarification to be garnered from participant observation and interviews. Combined with a chat room and later options to continue interviews via email or Instant Messaging (IM), it would maximize the opportunities for participants to choose the time and place of participation and increase the collaborative nature of the research. The chat room was incorporated to give participants the ability to enter and re-enter the discussion as often as they wished to express their opinions as the research progressed. The introduction page to the chat room set an hour aside each Thursday evening and Saturday morning for me to be available

online for questions. After three months and no visitors or email asking for a scheduled time to interact, I removed the chat room to minimize research costs.¹⁰ I suspect that the low response rates to the survey and chat room stem from 1) the close knit nature of the community making them disinclined to seek out non-Zoroastrians 2) a large segment of those online appear to primarily use it to keep abreast of news on the Zoroastrian community and maintain closer ties. It is relevant to note here that while membership on email lists is high, the actual number of individuals who post is small. Combined with the fact that the purely news email list of the Zoroastrian News Agency has the highest membership of Zoroastrian interest Yahoo! groups, I believe it reasonable to conclude that the type of active back and forth discussions that occur in chat rooms is not an attractive means of communication online for the majority of Zoroastrians.

The low response rate on the survey was initially seen to be a large impediment to understanding how online users framed and practiced their identity as Zoroastrians. Utilizing Ignacio's (2005) approach of examining dialogue on and participating in electronic email lists, I utilized the Yahoo! groups to look at the substance of posts, interactions between members of different ideological perspectives across the 'lists' or 'alias'¹¹, and interact with members directly. Interaction with members of the lists' is both similar to traditional face to face interviews and initially more challenging. I would liken it to interviewing a large room of individuals who start out as complete strangers. The virtual world then complicates the social dynamics further with a text base communication that can then be shared by a member by cross posting to another list, possibly of a very different viewpoint on controversial topics. Over time, a few individuals communicated through the lists or private email and over time with regular interaction nuances of communication and understanding developed. Whereas with an interview I might have only one chance to ask questions, with the list I could 'reach out' at 2am if I had a sudden thought or need for clarification for example allowing a great amount of flexibility to both mine and my respondents schedules for communication. My participation also has been an introduction to the wide range of Zoroastrian identity and a vehicle for future interaction and access to traditional avenues of participant observation at events.

I had planned on attending two events to establish a physical presence within the community: the 11th Cultural and Educational conference December 6th, 2008 in California sponsored by the Council on Persian Culture and the 11th Zarathushti Games July 2-6, 2008 in San Diego sponsored by the Zoroastrian Sports Committee (ZSC). The logistics for attending became unfeasible and groundwork is being laid for attendance at future events. This will allow me to note possible generational and regional differences in the performance of community rituals and identify values and practice which have gained importance that differ from officially stated, ideal values and practice. This will also enrich understanding of how online and offline beliefs and practices are reflective of each other. Further information gained through interviews will provide a way to validate online theology and statements and compare the respective cognitive views for similarities and differences in perception of identity.

An unanticipated challenge became a significant insight into Zoroastrian cultural mores. The youth survey was originally designed for the 12-17 age group. Federal guidelines follow cultural mores in the US designating those 18 and older as adult. US cultural practices also accept dating in teenagers generally of high school age. Issues around marriage and children also are topics of discussion among teens as well as young adults, thus questions on marriage and dating were included. The review board required a pilot study with community leadership. Several of these members pointed out that in the Zoroastrian community the 'Youth' range used for the Scouting/Guiding activities are 11-14, 14-18, and 18-26¹². Another respondent has pointed out that the Poona Congress and that for North America has established 18-40 as the 'Youth' range. Zoroastrian Parsi/Irani youth often do not begin dating until after high school, beginning in college and later in their early twenties. It should be noted that for Iranian Zoroastrians, dating is even more restricted. Based on these age ranges employed by Zoroastrians for 'youth', several felt that questions on marriage and dating would not necessarily be age appropriate. They also expressed concern that orthodox parents would object to questions on marriage because of issues surrounding intermarriage as well as sensitive topics of conversion for example, so the online survey was split into one for 12-14yrs. and one for 15-17yrs. Questions on dating, marriage, and

sensitive topics of conversion and intermarriage were greatly modified for the 15-17 group (Appendix C – Survey 2) and eliminated for the 12-14 group (Appendix C – Survey 3).

It is appropriate here to briefly discuss the actual development of the material of the survey. Questions were initially created from a survey of the topics of debates witnessed on websites. Hinnells (2005) and Mehta's (2003) UK Zoroastrian Survey were drawn from to create a comparative set of questions and to look for important demographic questions.

Ethical Considerations, Respondent Partnership

Scattered throughout discussion of methodology are references to ethics of working on the Internet and considerations of respondent privacy. I would like to take a brief moment to consider a facet of Internet research that is similar to yet different from traditional ethnography. There is a dual and at times conflicting sense of private and public about the Internet. Websites are open to the public, easily found in searches and often have hundreds or thousands of links in an intricate web allowing people to surf from one place to another in something of a neighborhood open door policy. Yet, they are copyrighted and visitors must remember to ask to use material that is freely set out. Several researchers have commented on this issue in more detail (Mann and Stewart 2004)¹³. In general, I have adopted a traditional approach treating quotations from sites as traditional text requiring proper citations. Images used are only with the express permission of the webmaster or appropriate individual. In consideration of the sometimes heated conversations and the sensitive position of Zoroastrians in Iran, I have changed the name of the social networking site, do not use individual names except where expressly requested, and refer to email lists for the purpose of quotes only as "Yahoo! Group".

Profiles on social networking sites present similar issues. Profile pages may be set to private on some sites which is a clear indication that they should be treated as if one were visiting a respondent's house for example when there. Many however are open to public viewing and often contain personal information as well as a friend's list network which offers a researcher easy access to others with similar interests that can be used, as in traditional ethnography, as further sources of participant observation or respondents. To do so, it is only ethical to let the individual

know when first contacting them whose page you found them on to be as transparent as possible. Blogs, debates, and comments are intended at one level to be public – like speaking in a park, restaurant, meeting or other public space. Does one need to ask for permission to quote from such postings? Again, like traditional ethnography, much of it is situational and contextual and researchers are sometimes left to rely on their own discretion. On Z-book for example I was invited as a guest, and so it does not seem appropriate to quote in any fashion even from ‘public’ debates unless permission is obtained. That does not preclude presenting general information and generalized statements credited to the site but without identifying information such as dates and names. To maintain a high level of transparency, my profile states my interest in establishing a profile there and shares some of the same information as to general interests and background that others share.

One final online venue to be considered is the electronic mailing lists. This also often acquires the same paradoxical private/public atmosphere during exchanges. Often multiple lists and individuals may be copied to bring them into the conversation or keep them up to date. On one hand, an individual should be able to share what they say with anyone they please, yet often previous comments are kept in the discussion thread and also may be disseminated. The sense of community within these lists creates a sense of private conversation and sharing without asking seems inappropriate. The MainstreamZoroastrians list reminds members that, “The MainstreamZoroastrians (MZ) is a private mailing list of and for voluntary members. Mails on MZ are confidential and for members only” at the bottom of every email making it easy to decide how to treat comments shared online. Not all lists do so; however, I have chosen in the ethnographic narrative to treat all communications in that light. Again, references are general with only “Yahoo! Group” and year indicated unless permission has been given.

Protocol

Survey

I developed an independent website hosted on the University of Nevada Las Vegas’ server to host links to the questionnaires. I often was asked about my interest in working with the

community, the purpose of the research, and a general explanation of my background; the site thus was designed with brief responses to all of these inquiries to set individuals at ease and begin the process of developing a mutual understanding and trust with respondents. Four different versions of the survey were linked to the research website at <http://www.complabs.nevada.edu/~gerth>: Zoroastrian 18 & over, Zoroastrian Youth 15-17, Zoroastrian Youth 12-14, and a non Zoroastrian version for those visitors to the websites that did not self-identify as Zoroastrian. A chat room was made available as a more open venue for participants to elaborate on topics of their choice, make qualifications or introduce aspects that may not have been covered in the survey. More detailed questions were presented on the Message Forum to invite discussion and in hopes of increasing active participation.

The webmasters were contacted requesting their assistance in posting a brief description of the research and a link to the survey on their site. They also were asked to complete a separate online survey developed specifically for webmasters to understand their motivations in establishing their site, their intended audience, and basic demographics of use for their site. Moderators/owners of Yahoo! groups were contacted for permission to post a brief description of the research and a request for interested individuals to participate in the online surveys as well. Moderators did not respond to direct requests for permission, and the general attitude was one that supported a very open forum and acceptance of posting a request for participation in the online survey¹⁴.

Participant Observation and Interviews

Participant observation and interviews were limited at this time to private email and active dialogue on the three aliases listed earlier: MainstreamZoroastrians, zoroastrianacceptance2, and Ushta. Two exceptions were phone interviews with two community members in the beginning of the survey that helped me to better understand what topics might be sensitive as well as discussions of some of the different perspectives of identity within the community. One individual interviewed shared the questionnaire with two orthodox parents and related their concerns about adding questions on marriage, intermarriage, and conversion which introduced topics that they were not willing to discuss as yet with their children. Another individual interviewed shared in

great detail for example the concerns of some of the community for allowing non-Zoroastrians into the Fire Temples as well as the intent by some to build and dedicated a temple that would be open to those who have converted or are spouses who have converted to Zoroastrianism.

Sampling Characteristics

Survey respondents were sought from ages 12 and older, both men and women, and from all countries. Respondents on the aliases were both men and women. Based on comments in posts regarding family and work, all respondents were over 18. Some indicated that they had grandchildren and so are estimated to be in their 50's or older. Seven respondents- three on zoroastrianacceptance2, one on MainstreamZoroastrians, and two on Ushta were non-Zoroastrians interested in Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. Respondents in general also often indicated their country of residence. One was a mobed from Iran, one individual from Australia, one from Berlin, one from Sweden, several from India, and several others from Canada and the United States. One of those from the United States was a mobedyar who had emigrated from India to the West Coast; he has twice graciously shared his time meeting with me at the Orange County Fire Temple to answer questions.

Sampling Groups

Sites chosen were restricted to those that are created and sustained by Zoroastrian individuals and associations. 100 websites (Appendix B), 67 Yahoo! groups (Appendix B), the social networking site Z-book, Orkut, and YouTube submissions were identified as possible study sites over a period of two years. The sheer volume of sites and postings required judicious selection of sites to keep it small enough for a quality discussion with individuals online as well as broad enough to include as many perspectives as possible. Hit counters, where found, that indicated a large number of visitors was used as one means of identifying important sites. Other selection criteria included presentation of Zoroastrian history, pages defining "Who are Zoroastrians" and other identity descriptions, uploaded sacred texts, and what is hoped is a representative cross section of ideologies from liberal to conservative. In looking at Usenet news

groups, only 10 were found in a search of the Google database under the term 'Zoroastrian'. Their extremely low activity history and membership indicated they are relatively unused and so would not be a representative source.

Membership in Yahoo! groups was requested from seven, six of which were accepted: MainstreamZoroastrians, Zoroastrian News Agency (ZNA), Zoroastrianacceptance2, Zoroastrianism, Ushta, and Atashkadeh. MainstreamZoroastrians, zoroastrianacceptance2, and Ushta were exceptionally active sites and so were the lists used for interactive dialogue. Zoroastrian News Agency strictly posted a selection of news items and community announcements and did not have any dialogue. This provided insight into items that had a high degree of community relevance and covered many current events such as the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008 that included Parsi endowed or owned buildings such as the Cama Hospital, the Nariman House, and the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel owned by the Tata family. Selection was limited to only 7 of the 67 to allow for an in depth understanding of the groups through carefully following discussion threads and participating through questions about ongoing topics and posting research questions. The size of memberships and group descriptions of goals and intent were further criteria for choosing where to participate. The intent was to choose a few groups with very large membership in the hopes that this would guarantee a strong level of activity even if there were a lot of members who did not actively post; a large membership would also provide a variety of topics and viewpoints which has proven to be the case. Groups were chosen to span perspectives from that of traditional, more orthodox views to that of a reformist site and an 'unbiased news' source for the community worldwide. Public access groups were perused for activity levels and to identify topics of discussion. Posts were carefully assessed for the number of unique individuals contributing by posting and the level of cross posting between lists.

Websites were discovered through investigating the web of interconnecting links on sites and periodic searches using the Google search engine under the following search terms: Zoroastrian, Zoroastrianism, Parsi, cyber temple, Zarathushti, Zoroaster, and Zarathushtra. Websites range from Zoroastrian Association sites, umbrella organization sites such as the Federation of

Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA) and the World Zoroastrian Organization (WZO), to individual web pages.

⁸ Dr. Choksy, personal communication.

⁹ Time constraints for the project became a serious concern once the online survey became active and showed a slow response rate. It is the author's intent to continue working with the community to continue to expand on the secondary goals for later publication.

¹⁰ Bravenet was used as the host for the chat room and discussion board. To keep both pages advertisement free, a professional subscription was purchased.

¹¹ Generally 'list' is used to refer to Yahoo! Groups and other similar forums. One Zoroastrian member pointed out that they refer to a list as an 'alias' and so this term may be used when referring to the groups from a member's point of view in this study.

¹² From a response in August, 2007 in a personal communication during the pilot study to determine the appropriateness of survey questions.

¹³ Some researchers have also noted that the lack of a codified methodology for Internet research causes review boards to be wary of approving online research protocols.

¹⁴ This was somewhat different from McKenna and West's study in 2005 where 17 of 100 moderators stipulated that the participation request be posted no more than once and 4 additional moderators removed the posting after 24 hours due to complaints. McKenna, K. Y. A., and K. J. West. 2007. Give me that online-time religion: The role of the internet in spiritual life. *Computers in Human Behavior* 23:942-954.

Zoroastrian Online Toolkit

The Internet is a place of both action and intent that do not always match. Creation here is not a passive event. It is a place where one creation of identity, of a world view, is taken in by others, changed and acted on to produce new intent and an organic, evolving environment. "The Internet is no mere static repository of information, but a place of action. Action in the form of email campaigns, USENET posting with intent to incite, and the rapid transfer of strategic (encrypted) data." (March 1995) Fourteen years later, technological advances have added sophisticated programs that allow individuals to share a constant stream of interests, interactive games, and activities as well as movies, pictures, as well as links to unlimited resources to outsource needs for information. The result for this community as in many others is the development of a wide variety of resources online. Websites and Yahoo! groups are perhaps the most visible and most often visited venues. YouTube also has a rich archive of videos specifically Zoroastrian in content. As already mentioned, Usenet groups are minimally present and only briefly described below. To date only one major social networking site strictly dedicated to Zoroastrians - Z-book on Ning- has been identified, but it has a tremendous richness of community and cultural development and social exchanges supporting Hine's (2000) concept of online community as both culture and cultural artifact. The Kuwait Zoroastrian Association is an association site that gives each member a profile page thus formatted for interaction like Z-book, MySpace, and Facebook etc. In interactions online, there is a constant goal of social networking – a process of reaffirmation and validation of individual world views, of identity, of a common sense of value and beliefs among segments of the community. Zoroastrians also utilize Orkut and Facebook as avenues to meet other Zoroastrians and share views. The rich social interaction and sense of community building observed on these sites was the premise of this study and it is born out in the following look at the resources being utilized. It must be kept in mind that in social networking sites such as Z-book, opposing viewpoints are in close proximity and there are sharp exchanges as well. The interactions and community building exchanges as well as the negative

and controversial perceptions of several individuals from the orthodox viewpoint will be discussed also in greater detail in chapter five.

Usenet Groups

A search of Google groups, one of the largest archives of Usenet groups, produced 10 groups using the search term 'Zoroastrian'. From Table 1 below the low level of activity quickly becomes evident. The Zoroastrian community made use of newsgroups soon after they emerged online in the 1980's. This will be a rich resource for further research into the beginnings of Zoroastrian online presence.

Table 1 Usenet Group Statistics

Site name	Creation Date	Number of Members	Avg. monthly posts
San Diego Zoroastrians	2007	141	4
Zoroastrian	2007	9	1
alt.religion.zoroastrianism	1994	23	4
Zoroastrian youth	2008	17	1
ZoroastrianPoetry	2009	3	4
World United Zoroastrian Youth	2005	6	1 only in 2005
HAMAZOOR	2007	1	1 only in 2007
DC Zoroastrians	?	1	Restricted/no info
Phozeex	?	1	No messages
International Zoroastrian Society.	?	3	No messages

(11/6/2008, 1/26/2009, <http://groups.google.com/groups>)(Page and Brin 1996)

Electronic E-mail Lists

These are commonly, though mistakenly, also known as listservs¹⁵ which is a specific electronic e-mail software first developed in 1986 allowing for an automation of large email lists and archiving of posts. Yahoo! and others such as Google and MSN have combined the features of electronic mailing lists and Internet forums for a wider range of connectivity between members. Messages can be read as email or on the group's homepage which is like a web forum. In

addition to the archiving function, Yahoo! Groups service provides additional functions on the web site such as voting, calendar systems, and file uploading.

A search of Yahoo! Groups using 'Zoroastrian' returned a list of 267 on April 4, 2008 and 210 on August 28, 2008 highlighting the fluidity of the Internet with quickly changing numbers of available groups. Of the 210, only 67 groups are specifically focused on the Zoroastrian community; the balance of the groups are sites that contained only spam emails, general dating sites, or were discussion groups for a wide range of religious beliefs and philosophies. Membership ranges from 6,156 for the Zoroastrian News Agency to only 5 for several others. The majority of these aliases have 5- 60 members with postings that are erratic and/or below 100 each month. Table 2 gives a summary of the Yahoo! Groups selected.

Table 2 Yahoo! Group Statistics

Yahoo! Group	Membership	Founded	Avg. Monthly Posts
Zoroastrian News Association (ZNA)	6,156	5/11/06	120
MainstreamZoroastrians	1,609	5/18/03	200
Working Zoroastrians	682	11/11/06	100
Zoroastrianacceptance2	323	1/27/06	140
Ushta	93	7/17/07	180
Atashkadeh	32	5/16/03	Less than 1/month
Zoroastrianism	16	8/17/08	2 only

(Information drawn from <http://groups.yahoo.com> on 8/28/2008 & 9/12/2008)(Filo and Yang 1994)

Zoroastrian News Association: This site addresses members on its homepage by the term 'Zarathushti' showing a shift from the Westernized term of Zoroastrian and also includes the Irani and Parsi terms for Zoroaster- Zarathushtra and Zartosht- in recognition of various segments in the community. The purpose of the list is clearly stated as a response to the need to link the global community with a source of "unbiased news related to all aspects of our greater community worldwide." Selecting the news to post would suggest that there is some bias. I have found that there seems to be a fair variety of event reporting and stories that may be considered both liberal

and conservative. The format of this site is similar to a news digest and easily organized so that the viewer can select the particular story of interest. Articles and informational postings are contributed by various members and by the moderator ranging from local, national and global events and issues that affect the Zoroastrian community. This may include births, engagements, achievements, celebrations, public service announcements, observances, and media links. Links to sites in Persian in Iran were included, suggesting that this is a truly global site in reach and was perhaps started by Iranians residing in America.

It is important to note that this site has the largest membership of all the groups and specifically does not allow, "...personal forums, discussions, arguments, articles, or public feedback on this portal" as it is the site's moderators' stated belief that there are numerous other venues available online for interactive discussions. This extremely high membership suggests that Zoroastrian members value informational venues most. Debates on lists present an impression of a community deeply engaged in issues. Coupled with the preference for informational sites this suggests that those actively engaged in debates over controversial issues may be much smaller and that the lists serve targeted memberships. The interpretation of the nature of online Zoroastrian membership as a small, highly engaged group is also supported by the observation that there are small numbers of unique posters observed in the lists.

MainstreamZoroastrians: This site was chosen for its strong commitment to traditional/historical Zoroastrianism. It was established as a forum to promote this perspective, educate and disseminate information on traditional issues, provide an "open and un-moderated, uncensored forum for the exchange of ideas and member opinions on Mainstream Zoroastrianism and issues that affect the Zoroastrian religion." One point of difference is the strong insistence that members always give their full name rather than an alias in postings.

Zoroastrianacceptance2: This site was chosen for its acceptance and encouragement of participation by, "...converts, those who might be interested in conversion and for anyone who wishes to discuss the original doctrines of Zarathushtra found on his Hymns, the Gāthās." This site is moderated and is owned by Ronald Delavega. Delavega is not a Zoroastrian by birth, and has become a prominent and controversial individual in the efforts to open up Zoroastrianism to

any interested individual. He spent a significant amount of time in a Christian seminary until turning to Zoroastrianism and becoming a student of Ali Jafarey, a Muslim by birth who converted to Zoroastrianism.

Ushta: This list also has a more liberal view, but as will be discussed later is part of another stream of Zoroastrian thought different in some ways from both the traditional and Zoroastrian acceptance². It is moderated by Alexander Bard, another prominent and controversial individual within the online Zoroastrian community and is active among European Zoroastrians. It welcomes all, ‘followers of the religion, philosophy and culture of Mazdayasna (also known as Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism in contemporary English)’. Followers are those born Zoroastrian and converts, “including...those interested in philosophies originating from the faith”. Zoroastrianism is here described as one of the world's oldest surviving religions and philosophical traditions. This particular site focuses more heavily on the tradition as a philosophy and in addition to Zarathushtra lists, “, the emperor Cyrus the Great (born approx 700 B.C.), the Central Asian philosopher Bodhidharma and the European philosopher Baruch Spinoza, as four of its most prominent and historically important characters.” Described readily as an Internet community, this vision of Zoroastrianism is a fully contemporary, non-traditional viewpoint and is described in the introduction as a “fast expanding global movement.” As will be pointed out later, these characterizations are questioned by many Parsi/Irani Zoroastrians and scholars.

Atashkadeh: Membership was sought for this site because of its link to the web site www.bozorgbazgasht.com which is aimed largely at converting Iranians back to their ancient religion and heritage. There was little to no activity on this site. There seems to be no explanation at the moment for this lack of activity especially given many Iranians interest in recapturing their heritage.

Zoroastrianism: Membership was sought and approved for this site largely because of its stated goals and resources of, “religious articles and stories, explanations by Zoroastrian Priests, and links to other Zoroastrian sites.” It also mentions that it included details for joining their new Traditional Zarathushtris Mailing List “which is uniting religious Zarathushtris worldwide.” There was also a direct acknowledgement of a role for the Internet illustrated in their statement that

membership was, “Standing up for our Glorious religion on the Internet”. There are several uploaded files in Persian and so the articles and other posted information was not accessible to study. There was low posting activity as well so the site proved to be a weak resource for this study.

Working Zoroastrians: Membership was requested because it has a relatively large membership with an average of 100 posts per month. The purpose of the forum is listed as to, “to facilitate networking & interaction amongst fellow Zoroastrians” through linking members of the community from different cities, states & borders through sharing of information. It is the only site with an emphasis on business development opportunities for entrepreneurs, sharing career opportunities, and career and education guidance and was selected to gain a window into the ways that Zoroastrians use the Internet to build business and economic ties as well as cultural and religious ties. The membership request was denied with no reason given. I suspect since the site is narrowly targeted for career networking that my presence as a researcher might be seen as intrusive and a distraction.

Social Networking Groups

These are generally ‘immersive’, virtual worlds that offer members a variety of services and individual profile pages. Discussed in greater detail in chapter three, such sites can be developed for general membership or a site can be created for a targeted audience defined for example by ethnicity, interests, or religion similar to the electronic emailing lists. As immersive media, they are designed, “...to create richer, more stimulating and more intuitive information spaces.” (Lopez-Gulliver, Sommerer, and Mignonneau 2002:pg.10) Some of the more well known social networking sites are those such as Facebook and MySpace. MainstreamZoroastrians members indicated Facebook has a significant Zoroastrian membership and that it was used as a place to exchange personal views by some about the elections of officers for the Bombay Parsi Panchayat (BPP) in India in 2008. This site briefly was visited, but not utilized for detailed examination in favor of sites that were created with a focus on Zoroastrians except for Orkut. Orkut was recommended by a member on Z-book. I visited it on their recommendation and will briefly describe it for its possibly rich source of information in future studies. This research focused on

YouTube and the uniquely Zoroastrian social networking site of Z-book and the hybrid web/social networking site of the Kuwait Zoroastrian Association.

Orkut: First registered in December, 2002, it is privately owned by Google (Amazon.com 1996), and has 33,724 other sites linked to it (alexa.com). It was ranked as #11 in traffic in October, 2008 though it has fallen significantly to #92 as of February 12, 2009 (alexa.com). This site's demographics indicate a strong membership in the 18-25 age range at 57.14%; most members come from Brazil with a 51.63% member share. The 26-30 age group and India rank second highest with 14.64% and 17.8% respectfully. The United States also has a strong membership at 17.24%. The balance of membership is divided among Pakistan, Afghanistan, the United Kingdom, Japan, Portugal, Paraguay, and Australia. Finding friends is listed as the most important activity at 57.37% indicating that while there may be a romantic component to the site, it appears to be limited with only 19.13% indicating they are there for dating supporting a significant community building aspect. This is supported by the strength of groups and organizations for drawing individuals together. A search on Orkut.com of 'Zoroastrian' produced over 1000 entries of individuals, groups, and organizations (Büyükkökten 2003).

YouTube: First registered on February 15, 2005, it is a privately owned and popular video sharing social network that also provides profile pages for those who register to post. Alexa.com ranks it as #3 in the level of traffic it receives and currently has 489,059 other sites linked to it. A search done 9/19/2008 for 'Zoroastrian' yielded 481 videos pertaining in some way to Zoroastrianism. These covered a range of categories: entertainment, music, education, news and politics, people and blogs, film and animation, travel & events, how to & style. One member posted 17 over the span of a year; the balance of posts show not more than two or three per unique poster.

Kuwait Zoroastrian Association (KZA): This site was created in April 2008, this site has already had 9,034 visitors and has 61 members and is "Dedicated to promoting the Spiritual Philosophy of Zarathushtra & Zoroastrianism" and seeks to contribute to the community by providing information "regarding our religion from different sites for the future young overseas Zoroastrian generation." (Khodaiji 2008) The home page is lavishly decorated with images of the

fravahor and Zarathushtra. A relatively new site, in addition to acting as the site for the association, it functions as a social networking site by virtue of providing each member with their own profile page that can be personalized. The site pages contain a wealth of material that is constantly being added to: KZA activities, information on the Fire Temples, lists of the Agiaries and Atash Behrams of India and Iran, ceremonies & prayers, jokes, Bollywood Bawaji news, and news on current events such as the attacks in Mumbai in 2008. One of the unique features of this site is that members are actively encouraged to contribute articles, photos, event announcements, essentially any information of interest and pertaining to Zoroastrian culture and religion so that building the site becomes a group endeavor.

Z-book: Here is a "Private Social Network created with great care for all Zoroastrians. We hope that you and your loved ones join us in celebrating our heritage." (Z-book.com) and as such is a membership by invitation only site; its name was chose by the administrators for its meaning for them as "be well"¹⁶. Created in January, 2008, it currently has 2,297 members, 93 groups, and various activities and resources that contribute to its networking strength: 5,486 photos, 771 songs, 179 videos, 940 discussions, 31 events, and 158 blog posts¹⁷

Websites

Zoroastrian websites are an amazing collection covering a wide range of perspectives and viewpoints all characterized by a passion for the Zoroastrian cultural and religious heritage. The wide range and sheer volume preclude specific descriptions as done in the above sections. In general, the sites were sorted into categories based on content, services offered, and goals as shown in Table 3. Goals such as, " Advance the teachings of the Zoroastrian faith, and the religious tenets, doctrines, observances and culture associated with the faith" (2002b) are common. The categories were further broken down into 'types' to further refine and capture the nuances of identity building and functions.

Table 3 Internet Website Statistics

Category	Number	Type
General Information	38	Cultural preservation, Religious, Educational/Academic
University Organizations	1	Inactive- archived in 2009
Community and Country sites	26	Community, Umbrella org.
Personal	13	Cultural preservation, religious
Special Interest	16	Special Interest, Business networking, Magazine, Directories, Matrimonial
News Sites	5	News and global community achievements
Commercial	3	Services and goods
Youth	1	First Z-youth magazine online

Services covered again a wide range of appeal: matrimonial, magazine subscriptions, directories, banking, business/entrepreneurial networking, Parsi recipes, financial assistantships in the form of scholarships and disaster relief, and digital archives of sacred texts. As the chart above shows, there is a surprising lack of commercial sites. I believe this may stem partly from the focus on the Internet as a source of information and a place to exchange views rather than a place to purchase religious items that may be purchased through more personalized interactions locally.

Several measures besides these types of categories, like the other sections discussed above, can be used to describe websites as an effective online 'tool' but are harder to get at since there is no membership data collected. Alexa.com provides several statistics for users and country of origin for many of the over 100 sites. To summarize, sites cover a range of origination. The vast majority are from Canada, the United States, and India. There are also single sites from Belgium, Norway, England, Germany, Sweden, Singapore, Russia, and a couple from Australia. Several are in Farsi/Persian based in Iran (Amordad, Berasad, Kerman Zoroastrian Association, Council of Tehran Mobeds, Tehran Zoroastrian Anjuman), and one Kurdish language site (Behdin). Greater details can be found in Appendix B. The scope of their interactive quality is limited; chat rooms are offered in about 25%; some like Zoroastrian.net and Delhi Parsis offer blogging options for commentary and feedback. As with other types of media, these sites are self-

conscious productions of identity and I have discovered that any detailed discussion of the structure of the sites quickly includes discussion of identity and so further discussion is reserved for Chapter V.

Historical Development of Zoroastrian Internet Usage

Details of Zoroastrians early use of online resources is not well documented at present. Sketchy details have been gleaned from list conversations and interviews with community members. While the earliest web site is that of the World of Traditional Zoroastrianism established in 1996 four years after the launch of the world wide web in 1992, Zoroastrians were using electronic data transferring capabilities as early as the 1980's. During the expansion of the high tech industry in the 70's and 80's coupled with the Diaspora to North America and other regions, chat groups began to form to exchange information. The first newsgroup developed from this online interaction was known as the Zoroastrian Alias. (Dastoor 2004) pg. 3. One respondent related that this particular site was begun by an Iranian working at Suncorp. Very early on the tension between orthodox, conservative Zoroastrian's and more liberal members became evident as orthodox members filed complaints against real and perceived online attacks on the religion. One petition of protest was submitted in 1996 signed by 559 Parsi/Iranis from Bombay to

...PROTEST THE HERETICAL VIEWS AND BLASPHEMOUS WRITINGS OFTEN TO BE FOUND ON THE INTERNET'S ZOROASTRIAN MAILING LIST. SOME MISGUIDED ZOROASTRIANS AND MEDDLING OUTSIDERS ROAM UNCHECKED ON THIS MAILING LIST, AND SLANDER OUR LOFTY PRAYERS, SCRIPTURES, PRINCIPLES AND PRACTISES THROUGH IGNORANCE, SELF INTEREST, OR DESIGN. ALMOST NOTHING THAT IS SACRED TO US...HAS BEEN SPARED FROM CHEAP ATTACK AND RIDICULE. EVEN THE HALLOWED NAME OF OUR PROPHET HAS BEEN DESCSCRATD FOR THE ENDORSEMENT OF HOMOSEXUALITY, LESBIANISM, AND BI-SEXUALITY. IF SUCH SACRILEGES CONTINUE, THIS MAILING LIST SHOULD BE CLOSED DOWN OR AT LEAST THE NOBLE TERM "ZOROASTRIAN" SHOULD BE STRUCK OUT FROM ITS NAME.

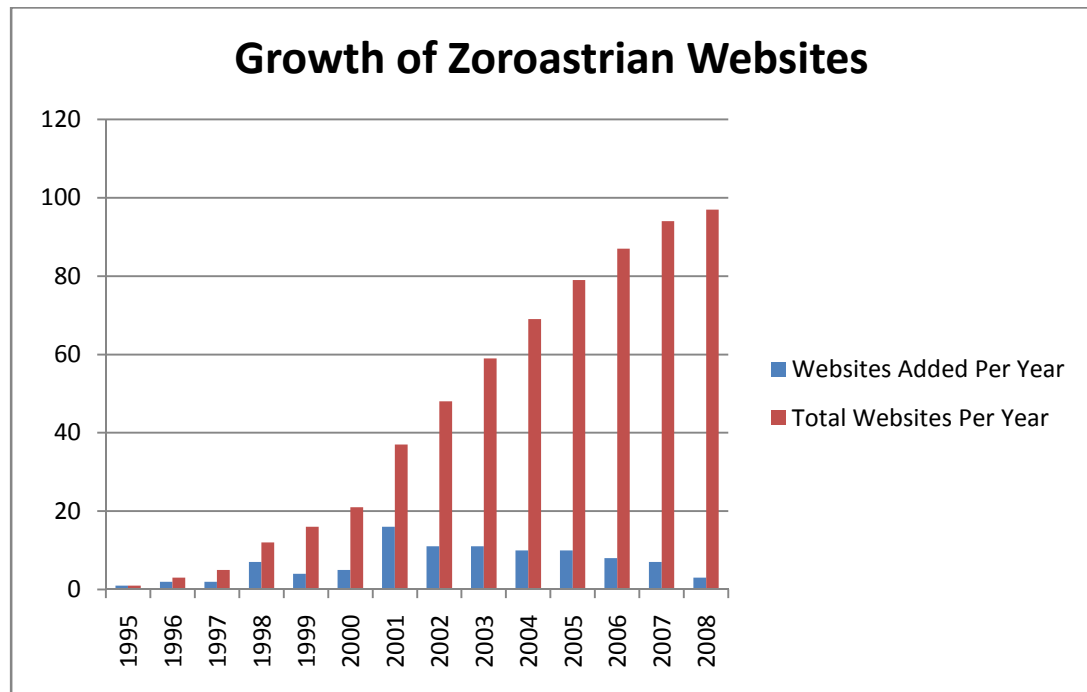
(World of Traditional Zoroastrianism 1996)¹⁸

A connection between the increased exposure of the religion made possible by the Internet and the rise of conversion is commented on by Alexander Bard, a high profile convert. He

became interested in Zoroastrianism in the late 1980's as a sociologist because, as he states, they were one of the 'first social identities' to begin using the Internet as a global communications tool. The archives of these early newsgroups, if they still exist, would provide a wealth of valuable information on the early use of the Internet by Zoroastrians and a window into the general development of religion online. To date however, I have been unable to find the archives of these early newsgroups. It is an area of further investigation.

The history of website growth is much easier to access and gives us a clear picture of rapid growth. Table 4 below shows the proliferation of Zoroastrian websites.

Figure 1 **Growth of Zoroastrian Websites**



Soon after the launch of the traditional site in 1996, Ronald Delavega launched zoroastrianism.cc (2001) and Ali Jafarey launched The Zarathushtrian Assembly (zoroastrian.org, 2005) both sites advocating open conversion and a 'restoration' of the religion by embracing the Gāthās only as sacred text being the original hymns of Zarathustra. I believe that this rapid growth and ensuing visibility of sites has contributed to the spread of conversions by the liberal, 'restorationist'

segment of Zoroastrian thought. Further work needs to be done with the early electronic email groups and their archival material as well as research into the early newsgroups and bulletin boards for greater and finer detail of the development of Zoroastrian presence online.

¹⁵ The concept of an automated mailing list manager was created in 1986 by Eric Thomas and the software he developed is now known as LISTSERV.

¹⁶ One respondent has pointed out to me that the phrase 'Ushta te' actually translates as "May happiness be to you" (S.M. personal communication)

¹⁷ (source: automated information attached to member email from 1-16-2009)

¹⁸ <http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/petitn33.html>

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Theory is an interpretive framework for evaluating the wealth of data that emerges from ethnography. The literature review which follows draws strongly on techniques from the field of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) for applying traditional ethnographic techniques to Internet ethnography. This field was one of the first to address the phenomena of the Internet as both culture and cultural artifact and the methods and merits of utilizing the Internet as a relevant and legitimate field site and topic of study. Unlike sociology, computer mediated communications and other disciplines; anthropology has been slower to apply conceptual frameworks to interpret life on the web. There are indications that it is becoming a more mainstream practice within the discipline with a growing database of case studies of online communities and cultures that are integrating the Internet into cultural preservation and practice.

A literature review allows the establishment of basic premises for the development of methodological approaches as well as placing data into comparative context. This study generated several questions that I seek to answer in the following review that helped establish foundational premises. The first question the study proposal generated was whether community as an entity existed online requiring a review of theories of community and then a review of research that substantiated that meaningful networks of obligations and ties or 'virtual community' could be developed online. The growing acceptance among social scientists that online groups often are virtual communities is used to support my use of 'communities of affirmation'. The evolution of concepts of community with the advent of trans-nationalism, globalization, and modernity has also lead to an increasing importance of multi-site field studies in anthropology; this is an exciting development I believe as multiple site fieldwork is a quality inherent in and encouraged by the Internet as field site and virtual society. Thus, the shift in anthropological paradigm would suggest that Internet ethnography is a valuable new resource for anthropological

studies. The growing corpus of ethnography of online groups and case studies that support accepting virtual communities supports a view of the Internet as a viable medium for a substantive exchange of ethnographic information between researcher and informants within the boundary of the online community. This research also suggests that the Internet is an effective experiential environment to understand emotional perceptions and value judgments by members about events affecting the community online, and in many cases those offline as well. This is explored in greater depth in looking at the anthropological literature on virtual community and ethnography.

Concepts such as identity, ethnicity, culture, religion, and diaspora have been the bread and butter of anthropological theory and have received a wealth of scrutiny in the scholarly literature. To examine then the possibility of Zoroastrian identity on the Internet, it is necessary to first define factors shaping group and individual boundaries such as identity, ethnicity, culture and Diaspora for a baseline of use. As Zoroastrianism has been historically seen as an ethno-religious community, theoretical perspectives on ethnicity and religion will be central to evaluate if offline ethnicity and religion is reflected in similar fashion online and so relate it to the matrix of current research in ethnic identity and diaspora as it affects cultural cohesiveness. Finally, how has religion grown online using online resources and community building to establish the Internet as sacred space for its members? Online religion is just beginning to be better understood with the recent interest in and growth of literature by researchers. It will be my argument, based on a comparison with the growing body of case studies, that Zoroastrians utilize the Internet very differently from other religions online such as the Catholic Church, Protestant denominations, Pagans, and Tibetan monks and thus are a variant that needs to be better understood.

Concepts as Boundary Markers and Movers

Concepts of identity, ethnicity, culture, community, Diaspora, and religion are embedded throughout this study. These invoke issues of theoretical perspective from anthropology as well as religion and sociology. All of these terms involve defining of boundaries and borders both for the researcher as well as for those we speak with. For the researcher, they help to give

substance to intangible concepts and firmly ground the discussion within a physical reality of geography, language, traditions and other physical manifestations of ephemeral categories. For individuals and groups, they form the boundary markers of identity and can be used to move the borders of “who am I” both in self introspection and in defining themselves to others. It is appropriate then to briefly define and clarify their usage before further engaging theoretical paradigms and data.

Community

Community is integral to the discussion of the viability of the Internet for sociological studies and is discussed in much greater detail shortly. It bears noting here that this is the boundary marker that most effectively defined the scope of the study. Zoroastrian community as mentioned in the introduction needed to be wide enough to encompass the changes occurring yet tight enough to provide a valid sense of a bounded sphere of study. What I would like to stress here are some of the distinctions and labels being used within the global Zoroastrian community as well as the distinctions that arise from looking at Zoroastrianism from the inside versus that of the outside researcher or casual observer.

Within the global scope of Zoroastrianism, there are distinct subgroups or communities recognized by Zoroastrians for their differing countries of birth and philosophical leanings. There are Parsi, Irani, orthodox, and liberal communities that contend over issues and definitions of a Zoroastrian. Parsi Zoroastrians are defined by their experience of historical Diaspora to India and very intent in large measure on declining population and revitalization. Irani Zoroastrians are more so defined by their experience of oppression and often speak of recovering their ancient heritage by reclaiming it in converting from Islam to Zoroastrianism if they have immigrated to a non-Muslim nation. They are also characterized by a sense of exile (Grenier and Perez 2003). References may also be made in discussion to ‘liberals’ or ‘orthodox’/‘traditionalists’ when referring to opponents within the community in discussions over conversion and intermarriage for example. Both from within and from outside these groups’ boundaries are clearly outlined.

An additional group known as ‘restorationists’ or ‘reformists’ have strongly contested the defining boundary of community and herein lies much of the importance of this study. For the

casual observer, a restorationist appears to be a part of the Zoroastrian community claiming to follow Zarathushtra and his teachings. For many within the orthodox community, however, by historical practice and definition they are not to be included as Zoroastrian at all. While members of the community may claim that they do not belong, they continue to insist on membership and in claiming Zoroastrian identity challenging both the historical community and the observer to evaluate community, its meanings, and our understanding of the social structure and contemporary 'Zoroastrian' identity.

Diaspora and Identity Dynamics

Axel (2004) reminds us that diaspora is a process rather than an object. It is a dynamic interplay of identities in a continual process where boundaries are reinforced and/or shifted to encompass new perspectives and traditions. The process turns members of a community into individuals on the outside immersed in a new culture, seeking to reunite with others who seek to recreate the boundaries of the old world, the identity of home. As immigrants they are faced with choices to cling whole cloth to a lifetime of internalized symbolism and meaning, be assimilated into their new culture redefining their identity following historical patterns (Smedley 1998), or transform into an identity that reconciles both. At times it is performance where individuals act out identity to explain to those outside the group what it means, in this case, to be Zoroastrian as well as often to provide concrete evidence to those inside the group that they meet community standards and definitions of 'Zoroastrian'. Similar to Axel's study of the 'intersections of technology, diaspora, and communication' for the Sikh community online, for Zoroastrians the Internet mediates narrative and the presentation and 'performance' of community events.

Diaspora as a process is characterized by movement – most obviously that of people, but also ideas. As such it is difficult to pin down and it is helpful to define here a set of characteristics and generally accepted approaches for defining diaspora. As of 1999, diaspora was generally used as a general term to refer to 'de-territorialized' or 'transnational' groups which lent it an air of being a catch all term for "immigrants, guest-workers, ethnic and 'racial' minorities, refugees, expatriates and travelers" (Vertovec 1999:pg.1). He goes on to state that, in the literature,

'diaspora' has become defined as 1) a social form 2) a type of consciousness 3) and as a mode of cultural production.

As a social form, the diaspora community is characterized by traits such as social relationships that are strengthened by ties to history and geography that draw from or create specific commonalities of experience such as migration, conscious maintenance of identity, institutionalized networks of exchange and communication, ties to the homeland and a position within the 'host society' as different in some recognizable way. Diaspora communities also adopt economic strategies that work within the institutionalized networks to strengthen co-ethnic members.

As a 'type of consciousness' the most conspicuous trait is a tension between diasporic identity and the 'adopted' national identity. It inspires an awareness of 'multi-locality' that drives members to strive for a commonality of experience and identity often sought in pilgrimages and a focus on material heritage remains. The Internet creates a space to pursue this causing Cohen to note as early as 1996 that, 'transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artifacts and through a shared imagination' (Cohen 1996:pg.516) For religious diasporic communities, this poses the additional consequence and challenge of disembedding a set of beliefs and practices, i.e. religion, from the balance of their heritage, i.e. culture. This is noted by Vertovec, Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000) and Fenggang and Ebaugh (2001) as well as others. The Zoroastrian Identity page (2006) on the California Zoroastrian Center's website is a clear example of this separation where they list the two as Zoroastrian Religion and Zoroastrian Tradition:

The Zoroastrian Religion, which represents the ethical aspect of the culture, is based solely on the hymns of Zarathushtra, which reflects his wisdom and thinking. These hymns are preserved in the book of the GATHAS (poems and songs in Persian). The Gathas reveal the way to a good life for all humans and how to make this world a better place to live for everyone. In his poems and songs, Zarathushtra taught that happiness, freedom and peace are based on the three paramount principles of GOOD THOUGHTS, GOOD WORDS, and GOOD DEEDS. These three pillars describe the foundations of Zoroastrian Doctrine.

The Zoroastrian tradition, comprising the historical aspects of Iran's rich Zoroastrian culture encompass various written documents pertaining to

geography, chronology, medicine, health and hygiene, law, religion, environment, ecology and administration of urban life. These documents have been written by many scholars and are the most valued remnants of Ancient Iran. They are collectively preserved in the AVESTA. Therefore, the Avesta is not only a book containing Zoroastrian daily prayers but also the repository of the History and Culture of a very ancient people, whose deep roots extend even into the annals of unrecorded history.

(www.californiazoroastriancenter.org/z_identity_en.htm)

Finally, as cultural production, diasporic communities both tap into and are victim to the process of globalization. The global flow of objects, images and meanings, a theme that is central to Barber's (2001) thesis of cultural homogenization due to technology, places a constant pressure on boundaries. Adaptive strategies of heterogeneity and diversity have been seen as central to the Diaspora experience. Global media, which for Appadurai and Breckenridge was only electronic media such as the bulletin boards, create the, "greatest disjunctures...since in the electronic media in particular, the politics of desire and imagination are always in contest with the politics of heritage and nostalgia." (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1989:pg.iii) How much more so then the Internet with its enhanced sensory input far beyond the capabilities of electronic bulletin boards at the time of their insight.

Hinnells explores further discussions of diaspora as it relates to the Zoroastrian community. In his discussion one important statement stands out and is found in my study of Zoroastrian use of the Internet: Parsis, like Iranian Zoroastrians, have a strong sense of homeland and stress their ethnicity as Persian as a means of linking to this heritage. His observations of ancient Iranian artifacts, symbols, and images in the homes of those he interviewed are replicated online personalizing and conveying identity on websites and social networking sites.

Several issues are encompassed within discussion of diaspora. The impact of multicultural environments and the transformations these initiate (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, Fenggang and Ebaugh 2001, Hinnells 1996, Hinnells 2005) contribute to experiences shaped by a legacy of exile (Grenier and Perez 2003). Again, it cannot be stressed enough, that while the sense of exile shapes reactions and concerns and so behavior for members of the community, unlike the Cuban legacy of exile described by Grenier and Perez, Zoroastrians do not use it to impact the society around them. Zoroastrians then are a diaspora that experiences a unique, nuanced exile identity.

Issues of revitalization, assimilation, fragmentation, and historical legacy and legitimacy (Hinnells 2005) are all invoked in discussion of diaspora communities and the impacts on identity. Hinnells (2005) points out that representatives of religious diaspora groups often become the 'gate keepers' as the, "...interpreters of their religion to the outside world and the filters through which the other religions are viewed by many of their own community." (pg.17). This is a point one observes in the online Zoroastrian community in discussions of how the North American community shares its faith with others and the modifications that come from such interfaith outreach. Each website and email list functions as a 'gate keeper' allowing multiple individuals to exercise their agency in defining Zoroastrianism both within the community and to the global audience at large.

Another point that Hinnells spends some time discussing about the Zoroastrian Diaspora is the use of history to gain access to the 'homeland', especially when one has been separated from it. Such access gains the legitimacy of heritage and a claim to identity. Axel (2004) also stresses the importance of historical origin and the traditional approach of using this as context to define the boundaries of the diasporic community. In reaching backward to a charismatic, golden past, we can then identify language, ethnicity, and customs as markers of the diaspora community boundary regardless of the effects of immersion in a 'host' society. Zoroastrians' use of their homeland of origin in Persia as an anchor for identity is readily apparent online. The attempts to create collective memories and identity do not always consolidate these however, "as the macro-politics of reproduction translates into the micro-politics of memory, among friends, relatives and generations." (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1989) Each individual then produces an egocentric vision of identity tinged with their specific perceptions of what is critical to preserving. This is seen for example in the wide variety of cultural videos posted on YouTube. The Internet encourages a cross pollination of these images and traditions through shared links, videos and forums where anyone can present their interpretation of doctrine and understanding of cultural history and practice.

Culture

Culture is closely woven into the narrative of diaspora communities, ethnicity, and religion. Language, dress, food, kinship structures, art and architectural styles are often used to define culture. Ethnicity and religion may or may not be included as defining an individual's membership within a culture. As Borofsky et al (2001) remind us, 'culture' is central to anthropological studies and ubiquitous in anthropological writings, but defining it is a constant source of debate. One common theme is a sense of shared beliefs and behaviors that at some level offer a general sense of shared meaning. The broad spectrum and soft boundaries of the term are emphasized by the sheer number of definitions, over 150, outlined in a review by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952). Wallace (1956) has a particularly insightful definition of culture that emphasizes, indirectly, the sense of process and change inherent in it:

A human society is here regarded as a definite kind of organism, and its culture is conceived as those patterns of learned behavior which certain "parts" of the social organism or system (individual persons and groups of persons) characteristically display... a society will work, by means of coordinated actions (including "cultural" actions) by all or some of its parts, to preserve its own integrity by maintaining a minimally fluctuating, life-supporting matrix for its individual members, and will, under stress, take emergency measures to preserve the constancy of this matrix.

(Wallace 1956, pg. 265)

Feinberg (1979) considers cultural theory as being separated into two dominant schools; one defining culture as the "totality of socially learned human phenomena" and the second "restricts the term to shared mental-primarily cognitive-properties". Part of the difficulty lies in the pervasiveness of 'culture' as Shore (1996) illustrates in his discussion of his experiences in Samoa: "Culture seemed to be everywhere and in everything. It was not easily pried free from the flow of life, so that one could isolate a moment of experience and say that there, at last, was a unit of culture for inspection." (pg. 43) As he further lays out in his discussion, 'cultures' have ideal cognitive models that serve as guidelines for behavior, and at times there are competing models that must be chosen from which results in variations in behavior. This would suggest that culture is a blend of cognitive modeling *and* actual behavior rather than strictly 'shared mental' properties.

I use 'culture' as a term that encompasses a set of normative rules and ideals of behavior, practices, and social interaction as well as what a group defines as generally accepted variations. Acceptable variation is a primary issue in the discussion of Zoroastrian identity. It is important to note that Wallace (1956) defines the 'mazeway' as the mental image individuals hold of their society and culture to 'act in ways which reduce stress'. I would suggest that this is a core definition of 'identity' and so the discussion of Zoroastrian identity will engage this mental image at various levels to decide what this image(s) is/are and what level of stress for change is tolerable and what actions are being taken to reduce the stress that movements for change are creating for Zoroastrians globally. "Zoroastrian" culture, like community, is not a clear cut set of units of measure precisely because discussions debate the necessity of some rituals as well as ethnicity as a component of being Zoroastrian. It can be generally seen to encompass the history of the Persian peoples as the birthplace of Zarathushtra and the cradle of the religion. Regardless of the differing perspectives of Zoroastrians worldwide, it also is agreed upon as encompassing certain rituals such as the navjote and annual celebrations as well as the Gāthās as sacred text, and the importance of the wearing of the kusti and sedhre that is bestowed at the navjote. Zoroastrians regard fire as sacred as well as believing in the necessity of preserving the purity of other natural elements as water and the earth. Zoroastrian culture is intricately bound up in religion. As Choksy (1989) illustrates, religion and ritual provide the explanation and orientation for adherents for interpreting human existence. Their importance 'lies in their ability to shape and endow daily life with meaning' (pg. xxi). He further links belief and practice with ritual in creating a link with the past for authority in cosmogony and revelation and the future in rituals power to transform. For Zoroastrians, ritual empowers them to assist Ahura Mazda in overcoming evil and purifying creation. Choksy concludes underscoring the importance of historical context 'because people and cultures cannot be separated from their heritage. Zoroastrians online live out this truth in every post and article aimed at preserving culture and strengthening identity through their history. Ethnicity is seen as integral to identity precisely because of its link to heritage. The balance of the Avestas that accrued to the Gathas cannot be discounted precisely because of their value as heritage that is intricately woven into the logic system of theology. Pallan Ichaporla,

a noted Zoroastrian scholar and member of the community, like Choksy (1989) emphasizes the connection between heritage and religion so that in the Zoroastrian culture one does not exist without the other. Ichaporia is one of the few scholars that actively posts on the Internet and his scholarship is often cross-posted from his list to the MainstreamZoroastrians list. On February 27, 2009 in such a cross-posting by one of the members he states,

The elaboration and propagation of ritual practices over time must be elucidated in order to comprehend fully the values attached to beliefs and practices, as Zoroastrians and their culture cannot be separated from their heritage. IT WOULD BE FOOLISH TO SET ASIDE THE ZOROASTRIAN RITUALS and deny the importance of past experience, both individual and communal, on perception and faith. In Zoroastrian rituals a symbolic relationship is established among the actions, words, objects and substances used in the rites and the religious universe itself.

(Dr. Pallan R. Ichaporia, MainstreamZoroastrians from Ahunaver list)

There is a widening variance in practice and belief among Zoroastrian groups as has been noted. For this reason I rarely if at all invoke the label 'culture' in speaking to Zoroastrian belief and practice. It runs the risk of presenting it as a monolithic category and it is precisely the variations that I wish to bring out as well as their impact on identity as it is discussed online. What then is the importance of culture to this discussion and how does culture relate to the Internet? Rheingold (1993) clearly sets out a link in the 'new medium's' behavior as a "conduit for and reflector of our cultural codes, our social subconscious, our image of who "we" might be..." pg. 11. The Internet reproduces the culture and contributes to shaping and changing it, and for Zoroastrians, by addressing metaphors and symbols in web design, reproducing artifacts in pictures, reproducing linguistic artifacts in audio such as chants, prayers, music, stories of pilgrimages and important festivals, and life markers such as weddings and navjotes. These are the cultural vehicles and practices that create an Internet that is cultural artifact/construction and a culture developing its own set of practices, rules and social etiquette. Drawing on Carlo Ginzburg, Cubitt (2000) reiterates the observation that media acts as a cultural filter that "selected and obscured preferred meanings, triggering memories and distortions, a filter that 'continually leads us back to a culture that is very different from the one expressed on the printed page-one based on an oral tradition.'" (pg. 133) Here, the Internet becomes the filter that presents particular

cultural memories, meanings, practices, and patterns of behavior which are read 'triggering' others to relate leading to an evolving and interactive narrative of identity. It needs be noted here that it is a selective narrative represented by those who choose to actively participate in the virtual world and so the narrative is that of select individuals and taken together comprise a unique tapestry that may be distorted in some ways from that offline as there may be voices that choose not to participate in the meta narrative of Zoroastrian identity.

Ethnicity, Religion, and Identity

Historically, ethnic identity has been malleable being associated with language, kinship, and occupations (Smedley 1998) . As such, it has had no biological traits and is seen as a cultural construct that targets common threads. Groups can use these as an adhesive for group solidarity and identity, yet they carry divisive elements. Ethnicity can contribute to fragmentation from an element of exclusivity, opposition, and competition and antagonism. Yet, these are precisely designed to strengthen boundaries of uniqueness between 'us' and 'them'. Smedley (1998) makes the point that recent history has seen ethnicity equated with race and that ethnicity or religious identity has been increasingly equated to a quality of one's DNA. This strengthens a sense of exclusivity which can play a part in revitalization efforts (Wallace 1956).

Scholars have created a wealth of studies and case histories in the course of documenting and creating definitional criteria for ethnicity. Melville (1983) summarizes the various theoretical approaches beginning with Wirth's (1945) focus on conflict theory that targets four different strategies for interethnic phenomena as a typology: assimilation, pluralist, secessionist, and militant. Park (1950) created a processual approach for inter-ethnic cycles that de-emphasizes causal factors in favor of integrationist factors in competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. Lieberman (1961) emphasizes migration, Shibutani and Kwan (1965) utilizes power structures and ecological factors. Barth (1969) makes the seminal contribution in recognizing that ethnic behavior does not always equal cultural behavior. Self-ascription becomes a significant factor in ethnicity and is woven with objective cultural criteria. From this perspective, ethnicity is not completely defined through blood ties. Melville stresses a political and environmental approach where self-ascription and the flow of assimilation interacts with forces to maintain a

unique identity. She also stresses that religion is not a factor taken into account. This perspective highlights inter-ethnic perspectives as well which I believe, with further consideration, can be fruitfully applied to examine the interactions of the Irani and Parsi communities as they vie for positions of authority and leadership within the global Zoroastrian community and is a subject to be more carefully explored in further studies. For the purposes of this study, ethnicity refers specifically to the Zoroastrians Persian background with encompasses both blood and culture depending on contextual references. A Zoroastrian may refer to themselves as Persian calling on their ethnicity as a defining boundary marker from someone who is Chinese for example. When speaking of other Persians such as Iranians who are Muslim, ethnicity incorporates cultural aspects of language such as Dari which was adopted as a specific Zoroastrian dialect in Iran as well as ritual practices and dress that serve as identifiers of a unique identity.

Religion as noted is intricately woven into Zoroastrian culture as it is for many. The question of what is cultural practice and what is religious practice is a distinction many immigrants grapple with and is fuel for cultural change for immigrant groups. One can begin to imagine the impact this may have on a diaspora community that has groups in numerous cultures that might initiate a variety of areas for change challenging continuity in the global diaspora community. Zoroastrianism is traditionally rich in ritual and prayer that are communal events. How then does this translate to online religious practice? What is religion online in actuality- a direct translation onto the Internet in the form of taped video of services that can be archived and accessed by adherents on demand, a place to share pilgrimages and other inspirational events, a tool to post meetings and other information for the societal health of a religious community, or a sacred space to practice in through cyber temples and other means of communicating with the divine through virtual space? With religion holding such an important place in humanity's societal structure, it is important to understand how the Internet has impacted its practice.

Trapped in a constant tension between the modernizing influence of technology which challenges power structures and presents opportunities, especially for youth, to question and challenge established views, religion has successfully adopted it and used it as a tool to spread its message through radio, television and video (Goethals 1981). The intersection of religion and

the Internet combines two forces with far reaching power to shape culture. Hine (2000) elucidates the stream of postmodern theory that focuses on the loss of faith, the grand narrative of fragmentation of self and the decline of religion pointing out that contrary to expectations, technology has become a rich arena that lends its power to engaged in empowering the search for self. She draws in part on the concept of 'social inertia' theory that suggests rather that individuals will begin utilizing new technology by transferring existing social patterns and power structures to its use until new uses are gradually perceived and then a dynamic interaction is created to utilize new opportunities. Religious groups have rapidly perceived the new advantages of the Internet even as they acknowledge the dangers and challenges.

Brenda Brasher (2001) was one of the first to discuss the emergence of religion online. She taps into the sense of 'spiritual wonder' and utopian perspective that the Internet is a sacred space to more closely commune with the divine. One question is whether the Internet 'places' the transcendental experience in the same way as traditional practices. Religious ritual is a communal experience binding community within past, present, and future. It creates a bond within the congregation that says this is how it has always been, this is how it is now, and this is how it will always be, "...the words of liturgy can connect that which is present to the past, or even to the beginning of time, and to the future, or even to time's end." (Rappaport 1999) pg. 152 The Internet compresses time and space, an effect that will be referred to often in the course of this discussion, creating a sense of eternal present which Brasher suggests is a 'taste of forever'. In this sense, the Internet can place the transcendental experience similarly to that of traditional practice. Communion between the individual and the divine is ultimately an individual experience and so the Internet can encourage this in meditations and virtual shrines or cyber temples inducing a liminal experience. Communion is also between members in rituals, prayers, and observances that bind them together as a group in the public sharing and admission of belief. These transcendental experiences are often rooted, and especially for Zoroastrians in observances at Fire Temples, in a multi-sensory experience. Virtual pilgrimage and cyber temples offer a similar yet very different experience which will be touched on in chapter vi. This 'sense of

forever' has contributed to the Internet as being defined as a 'secular divinity' (Cubitt 2000) as well.

The Internet has been variously described as a utopian space of revolutionary power as well as a dystopian space of illusion (Gray and Driscoll 1992, Robins and Webster 2002) and homogenization (Barber 2001) as will be encountered in the theoretical overview of the Internet shortly. Religion has grappled with this dichotomous perception of the Internet as well. Brasher and others have noted the utopian joy of those who see virtual space as sacred and transformative. Scholars and commentators have also noted the fears of religious leaders that it is not only absent authority but is intrinsically 'anti-authoritarian' and a purveyor of dubious morals and temptations (Brasher 2001) As with any media that has a transformative effect in how we perceive the world, it draws intense reaction and efforts by both perspectives to set its agenda. Brasher notes that concern for the, "unacceptable challenge to the particularistic worldview their tradition espouses" (pg. xiii) has paradoxically created a drive to occupy virtual space through religious intranets and religious search engines. Others, in efforts to reach out to the expanded audience the Internet provides reach out in virtual shrines and other participatory venues to also present their controlled messages.

This general overview is by no means exhaustive, but is meant to give a general sense of how religion plays a role in community and has appropriated technology, in this case the Internet, to strengthen itself in a rapidly changing world. The utilization of the Internet by both those concerned about the risks of its use to believers and those seeking to capitalize on it has created a wave of differing religious communities online. Within the U.S. alone, Pew Internet and American Life Project found in a 2003 survey that 64% of the nation's 128 million Internet users in 2003 have turned to the Internet for religious or spiritual matters.

The "online faithful" are devout and they use the Internet for personal spiritual matters more than for traditional religious functions or work related to their places of worship. But their faith-activity online seems to augment their already-strong commitments to their congregations.

(Rainie, Clark, and Hoover 2001:pg3)

This is for the U.S. only, but one has to wonder with the widespread sites for Pagan, Wiccan, Buddhist, and other religions as well as the over 100 Zoroastrian sites that represent this little known religion how extensive the use of the Internet is on a global scale. Brasher notes this trend and offers the perception of the Internet as the 'ultimate diaspora'. I have proposed that Zoroastrians have followed this diaspora in a rapid increase of Zoroastrian sites and discussion groups online which represents a third wave of diaspora for the community. The important difference that emerges in later discussion is that these sites are created by laity who feel a need to explain their beliefs to others and provide information for co-religionists. There is a conspicuous absence of Zoroastrian scholars and religious leaders online as well as a conspicuous lack of perception of the Internet as a sacred space except perhaps among the 'restorationist' group which, in 2009 as of the time of this writing, has created a cyber temple for visitors to meditate on select messages in front of an image of sacred flame on the screen.

Internet: Contextual Reference and Viability

There are numerous early commentators on the impact of computers on our awareness of ourselves (Turkle 1984) and the early history and development of the Internet and its attendant social impacts as a next step in the development of communication technology (Jones 1995, Rheingold 1993, Turkle 1984). The following is not an attempt to recreate this narrative; however, a brief look at its historical, explosive growth and the extent of its current usage is relevant on several counts: 1) It emphasizes how deeply embedded the Internet is in today's social structure, relevant to discussions of online community 2) Details the various types of online communication available, 3) examines the evolution of theoretical perspectives of the Internet's transformational power as a utopian or dystopian environment that influence current views of online interaction, and 4) outlines how the use of the Internet as a field site and virtual ethnography is a logical next step and valuable arena to look at culture construction cohesion, and change.

Emergence of the Internet

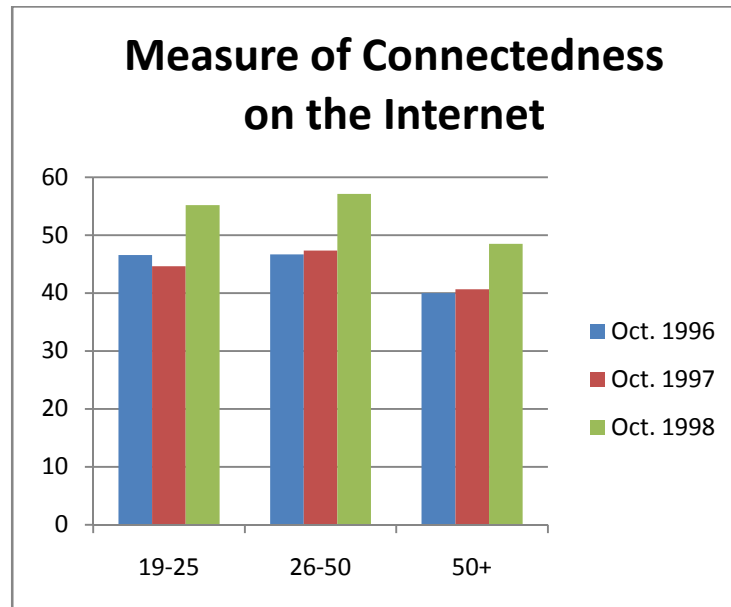
The Internet developed out of the first attempt in 1969 by Charley Klines at UCLA to send the first file transfer (Howard and Jones 2004, Jones 1995). Email was first sent in 1971, mailing lists

1972, MUD's 1979, Usenet in 1980, and IRC (Internet Relay Chat) in 1988. The culmination of each of these expanded capabilities was the World Wide Web launched in 1992 which came to be known most often as the New Frontier (Lange 2008). So rapid was the growth by 1993 that it has been labeled the year of the Internet explosion by several scholars (Jones 1995, March 1995).

In 1993 the growth of the web was already exponential. Popular press and scholars quickly began to quote staggering figures claiming Internet user growth was doubling monthly (March 1995). Matthew Gray wrote a program he named The Wanderer to roam the Web and collect sites; launched in June 1993, it continued to travel the web until January 1996. In June of 1993 The Wanderer counted 130 web sites, in June 1994 2,738 – an increase of 2,000%. By June of 1996 it estimated 230,000 web sites, and by January of 1997 650,000 (Gray 1996).

The GVI Center at the College of Computing in the Georgia Institute of Technology began a series of surveys to measure and understand Internet usage beginning in January of 1994 and conducted each October and April through October of 1998 (GVI 1998). They are important for their focus on the backgrounds, interests and characteristics of users. Quickly evolving, they began tracking data by education, geographical location, e-commerce, ethnicity, language, and other cultural and ethnographic data. After only two years, the Internet showed evidence of becoming a cultural artifact reproducing and influencing the concept of community. In October 1996 and for the remainder of the surveys conducted through 1998 '*Community Building*' was a category measured with the following question: "Since getting on the Internet, I have become (more, less, equally, don't know) connected with people like me" to attempt to gain some sense of measure of the power of the Internet to build community and exploring the possibility of social networks migrating to a virtual environment. In October 1997, a question focusing on '*Community Membership*' was also added. Table 5 below shows the reported increase of feelings of connectedness indicative of the first developments of social networking online.

Figure 2 **Measure of Connectedness on the Internet**



(Copyright 1994-1998 Georgia Tech Research Corporation. All rights Reserved. Source: [GVU's WWW User Survey www.gvu.gatech.edu/user_surveys](http://www.gvu.gatech.edu/user_surveys) (GVU 1998))

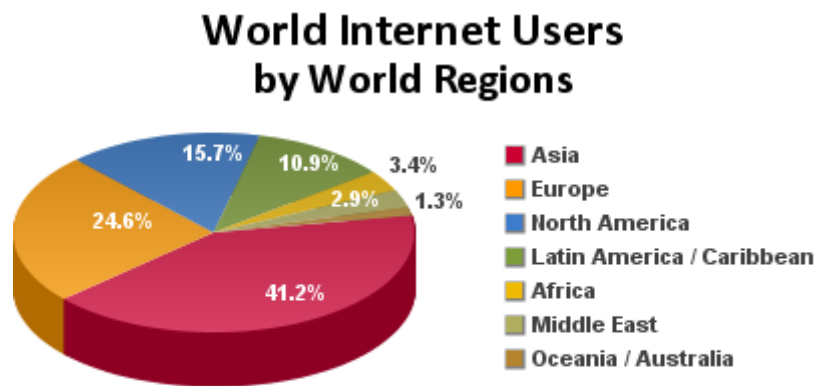
Several variables were found to effect user perception of the Internet as a place for community: geographic location, gender, age, common interests, similar professions, similar hobbies, computer experience and later skill. On average between the sixth survey (Oct. 1996) through the eighth (Oct. 1997), 45.54% of respondents felt more connected to those who shared their interests since they had become active online. Those with more experience on the Internet generally felt increasingly connected as did those who were younger. Gender was not as clear cut. Women were more likely to feel connected with family and with those in similar life situations while men were more likely to feel connected with those of similar hobbies and professions. Gender appeared to affect the pathway for establishing social connections, but overall, appeared to have little effect on a sense of community membership itself.

A sense of connectedness was an important issue to predict the feasibility and success of the study. Indicators of Zoroastrian use of the Internet and factors that might indicate predictive patterns were even more important in gauging at the start whether such research might be feasible. Understanding the pervasiveness of the Internet and Zoroastrian demographics

particularly would indicate if a fair number of individuals might be reached by online surveys. It would also support premises that the Internet has a large enough reach to foster connectedness and was socially embedded enough to pursue online community. Connectedness, or affective ties, is a key feature of online community to be discussed shortly.

Zoroastrians on the Internet- Predictive Patterns

Today the Internet continues to grow in reach; the Miniwatts Marketing Group estimated world Internet users at 1,407,724,920 for the first quarter of 2008 (Minniatts 2008) and that of users in areas of Zoroastrian populations is growing at significant rates. Figure 1 from the same site graphically illustrates the distribution of users worldwide:



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
 1,596,270,108 Internet users for March 31, 2009
 Copyright © 2009, Miniwatts Marketing Group

Figure 3 World Internet Usage

Table 6 below isolates the numbers of Internet users and percentage of penetration for areas of the world with large Zoroastrian communities.

Table 4 Internet Penetration by Region

World Region	Usage Growth 2000-2007/2008	% Population Penetration	Internet Usage (millions)
North America	129.10%	73.40%	247,637,606
United States	125.60%	71.00%	215,088,545
Canada	73.20%	66.00%	22,000,000
Middle East	1176.80%	21.30%	41,939,200
Iran	7100.00%	27.50%	18,000,000
Asia	363.40%	14.00%	530,153,451
India	1100.00%	5.30%	60,000,000
Europe	265.70%	48.00%	384,332,394
United Kingdom	162.10%	66.40%	40,362,842

(data © <http://www.internetworldstats.com/> (Minniawatts 2008))

North America, while third in raw population numbers of Internet users has the highest Internet penetration in the world. Canada and the United Kingdom also have a strong Internet penetration. This coupled with strong Zoroastrian communities in these locations suggested that I could expect a feasibly strong response rate from these regions. India and Iran show phenomenal usage growth; however, while these two areas of the world have strong Zoroastrian communities, the percent of population penetration is low suggesting that I would have a smaller percentage of responses from Zoroastrians living in Iran and India. However, the Parsi community is highly educated and urbanized, which I believed would offset this which has proven to be the case with many sites based in India. FEZANA's survey of the Zoroastrian community in Canada and the United States in 2005 found that 72% were born in India, 6% in Iran, and only 6% and 1% respectively were born in the US and Canada (Jesung 2005). This suggested that much of the North American response would be from an older generation that had immigrated and would be strong in advocating identity preservation as suggested by Hinnells' work (1996). Paradoxically, the North American community is regarded by other Zoroastrian groups as the primary source for change¹⁹ such as acceptance of intermarriage. I believe this springs from the same source of a

need to revitalize the community and build a larger membership as that of traditional, orthodox perspectives. The North American community leads in pushing for change by broadening the boundaries of identity so as to include for example children of intermarriages within the fold. Immigrant religions have been found to undergo intense periods of self introspection with the second generation much less bound to tradition. I was keenly interested to see if the youth who responded to the survey showed less conservative responses on the topics of intermarriage and conversion and what specifically they might use the sites for.

The low penetration rates for Iran and the existence of government censorship of sites initially led me to expect few responses from Irani Zoroastrians unless they were immigrants. Internet penetration figures for Iran are at first glance misleading. While they suggest that only a few individuals in a community have Internet access, the reality is that there are Internet cafes with access available in almost every village and have been as early as 2003. Cell phone use and Internet access through these is also widespread even in mountainous regions²⁰ So, while Irani Zoroastrians might not have access to the Internet from home, access is still fairly easy to obtain. Because it is accessed in public settings and there is online censorship, certain topics might be sensitive and this issue would have to be kept in mind when engaging in discussions with Irani Zoroastrians online. I do not feel it impacts survey response significantly as the questions avoid issues of Islam and comparisons between the two religions.

Society from Communication: Internet as Social Narrative

...the Internet is not growing apart from the world, but to the contrary is increasingly embedded in it.

(Agre 1999)

Researchers were quick to recognize that with such phenomenal growth was the opportunity to use the Internet as an information gathering tool. It was also a developing space promising to have an immense impact on society. Technological advancements from email to IRC culminating in the World Wide Web, were about increasing the quality and quantity of information exchange that lie at the heart of social networks, and bringing it experientially closer to the physical world. The Internet encapsulates the passage of information spatially and symbolically:

Communication...means passage from one place to another... it means the transmitting of a message. In terms of the highway, it means an unending flow of traffic – perhaps much of it essentially aimless, a kind of search for some place or person to help reinforce our identity, it also means the signs and billboards and lights and signals – a chorus of communication such as no generation has ever before seen.

(Jones 1998 quoting Jackson's 1985 "The social landscape" pg.4)

The use of computer mediated communication is part of what Jackson, extrapolating from a study done in Holland, sees as "the need for sociability, the need to use one's own personal possessions, the need to collect experiences, and the need to run dangers." (Jones 1998) The Internet provides a communication forum of incredible speed, instantaneous responses, unlimited collections of experiences and risk encompassed in social interactions with both friends and strangers. It has been a response to the rapid developments of technology that have enabled the mobility of a world population, the birth of international corporations that reach beyond national boundaries, and tightly woven interdependencies which are unsustainable without rapid, global transportation and communication. Long distance communication is now narrative clothed in audio and visual input that is interactive rather than a one way transmission of information.

One might argue that communication here is essentially limited to its efficacy as a tool rather than a vehicle of social networking and cultural implications. Several authors however present cogent and detailed arguments of how media is intimately tied into social networks and impacts culture (Barber 2001, Hine 2000). Capitalism, media and entertainment are intimately associated and become communication that is often more than simple information exchange, but rather a reworking of cultural meaning and symbolism (Barber 2001). Information exchange becomes narrative couched in cultural icons, symbols and metaphors. As Jones points out, narrative is an integral part of understanding computer mediated communications. Communication that becomes narrative becomes social interaction and carries assumptions of meaning. Kling (1995) argues that narrative is at the heart of social movements. Mass media studies is about understanding how storytelling, narrative and creating new worlds of identity and 'being' are negotiated through media and the impact these have on perceptions various groups. Ginsberg's (1994) examination of the utilization of film to push forward the story of minority groups' identity in their own words

rather than one shaped in popular media by those peering in illustrates this dramatically. She illustrate show native narrative through film creates a sense of empowerment allowing them to tell others what they define as central to their experience. The Internet, as the latest development of mass media, is the next step in the evolution of human communication and the efforts of groups to maintain membership despite the distances that separate themselves. For the first time mass media brings the act of creation and self revelation within reach of the average individual who can now create and publicize their own perspective of their membership in a group be it bounded by ethnicity, religion, shared interest or commitment for change. Identity is our way of setting forth who we believe we are and who we wish to be. It is assumptions about those around us and the nature of our connections to them. Zoroastrian websites readily illustrate how any individual with access to a computer may set forth for public viewing what they see as true Zoroastrian belief and practice. It is a communal recording and shaping of individual perceptions of identity and truth.

Mass media studies have largely focused on television and film. Scholars have looked closely at the effects of these forms of communication on community, religion, and identity (Ginsberg 1994, Goethals 1981). Jones (1995) extends this to detail how the Internet flows naturally along a technological trajectory of identity and community formation and transformation on almost a daily basis. It offers data transmission *and storage* enhanced by both audio and visual impact. The creation of virtual realities engages the imagination and allows users to actively create their own worlds and interact with others on a global scale if they choose.

Communication technologies are comprised of three important aspects: transportation, communication, and storage. If communication is about transmission of information, then the Internet is a vast arena of communication offering transmission of a welter of messages. Reporters and others have begun to document the variety of uses we continue to discover for the web as a viable communication tool and means of outreach from using it to develop the 'softer' skills of dental medicine in communicating with patients to connecting grandparents with grandchildren in weekly/daily interactions through webcams, to virtual marriages that end in emotional distress and 'death' of online ex-spouses (Harmon 2008, Report 2008, Yamaguchi

2008). As volume, quality, ease of transfer, and sensory stimulation increase, so will the demand and versatility of the medium. Storage allows unlimited access. Offline, it seems impossible to continually add objects, symbols and processes without releasing others, yet with the Internet we are only limited by the technological resources available. As a result we endeavor to store experiences and the knowledge moving from a few kilobytes of information to 150 gigabyte flash drives that we can carry in our pockets. We are aware that we are formed of information, "...almost as much as we are constituted by blood, skin, and bone, and that, no matter the recording method we may use to externalize the memories and experiences we store, without us they would not make sense." (Jones 1998:pg.4)

Stored for relatively unlimited and continual access that can be shared and continually updated and archived, the Internet is fluidity in time and space with a paradoxically ephemeral quality. This fluidity has been used in scholarly debate to argue both for and against genuine online community and identity creation in questioning the capability of the Internet to foster the growth of social capital as well. Social structures become laterally organized producing a decentralization of communication and authoritative hierarchy (Levy 1997, Zaleski 1997). Religion online moves doctrine into the easy reach of the laity. Ease of access to universal stores of sacred knowledge allow for questioning which has created different approaches to worship and perspectives on the divine. For Zoroastrians, this has meant that many individuals have begun posting their 'new' interpretations of ancient texts.

Internet Metaphors: Power to Change the World

Popular media and many scholars initially presented the Internet as a brave new world that would revolutionize how we share knowledge and communicate with each other. From 1994-1997 (Swiss 2000) the Internet was referred to by the pervasive metaphor of the "Information highway" and the 'New Frontier' (Dean 2000, Lange 2008, Shields 1996) as a means of capturing what they saw as the essence of this vibrant, new technology. Scholars perceived that it was a transformative space capable of affecting the social fabric deeply enough to enable social revolution (Levy 1997). Groups utilized the reach of the Internet to rally individuals around mutual causes which 'fostered new political and social forces' (Schwimmer 1996:pg.562) Some pointed

to its ability to mobilize marginalized groups through creating alternative spaces (Correll 1995, Johnston and Laxer 2003, McLelland 2002), link diaspora groups (Bernal 2005), and revolutionize politics and allow grass roots movements' freedom and mobility (Johnston and Laxer 2003). Other scholars quickly began to present counter arguments of its limited scope or dystopian viewpoints that it was alienating and would serve to be a negative influence on community and social networks (Putnam 2000, Robins and Webster 2002). Witte (2004) points to Nie & Erbring's (2000) scathing comment that, "The internet could be the ultimate isolating technology that further reduces our participation in communities even more than television did before it." (Witte, pg. xv) These arguments are intimately tied to discussion of community and philosophical perspectives of the nature of social bonds. Zoroastrian use of the Internet, like other communities, is inevitably tied to these metaphors of 'new frontier' and 'space of isolation' and the nuances between these poles in perceptions of impact and value. One respondent agreed 'absolutely!' with Nie & Erbring's comment when I shared it, but also emphatically stated, "BUT they (Internet etc.) also help me to stay in touch where snail mail would have failed miserably!"

Community

This research study takes as a premise that the Zoroastrians on the Internet can be viewed as a community. The varying ideologies, at first glance to the casual visitor, appear similar and contribute to a sense of a single Zoroastrian community online. Deeper reading substantiates rather several communities organized around similar ideologies, practices, and views of appropriate means for strengthening Zoroastrianism. Community is a seemingly obvious entity yet it is a strongly debated term in various fields such as anthropology, sociology, computer mediated communication, and information systems. It has become a moving target being both 'contested' and 'contextualized' in academic literature. Yet community is one of the focal points of anthropological inquiry. A single community or group of communities plays out the blueprint of a culture embodying its rules and dictates. The nuances researchers have refined in trying to evolve our understanding of it are key to understanding the interplay of variables that are at work in the complex dialectic of social networking. Shared interests, limited membership, affective ties, shared values and definitions of normative behavior, and interactions based on obligations are all

discussed to varying degrees as structural features of community. Community, like culture is a set of shifting reflections that defy capture into a single clear definition with no exceptions. We can only capture a soft and shifting boundary that allows us to encircle and define a group of people with a core worldview as contrasted against others.

How then has community been defined and what are the theoretical shifts that have emerged in focusing on the effect of diasporas and trans-nationalism? Community, again like culture, has been widely debated. Galston (2000) begins his discussion of the merits of the existence of online community with Bender's original 1978 'classic' definition of community:

A community involves a limited number of people in a somewhat restricted social space or network held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation. Relationships are close, often intimate, and usually face to face. Individuals are bound together by affective or emotional ties rather than by a perception of individual self-interest. There is a "we-ness" in a community; one is a member.

(Galston 2000:pg.196)

Galston draws four defining features from this definition and uses them to assess the validity of online community: limited membership, shared norms, affective ties, and mutual obligations. He holds that Internet groups do not offer a limited membership as individuals may come and go having no incentive to remain. Each of the other three is also examined and he concludes that groups are too loosely tied to be considered community in the true sense of the term.

However, it is instructive to look closely at the fullness of Bender's (1982) definition that follows:

In its deepest sense, a community is a communion...A community is an end in itself: It may offer aid or advantage to its members, but its value is basically intrinsic to its own existence. It does not exist to serve external or instrumental purpose.

(Bender 1982:pg.8)

In the final analysis, community "is a communion" focusing again on the affective ties between members and stresses that the point and perception of value lies completely within the group rather than that as perceived by outside interests. Jumping ahead briefly to the question of online community, compare this briefly to Baym's (1995) claim about computer mediated communication and community:

...participants in CMC develop forms of expression which enable them to communicate social information and to create and codify group-specific meanings, socially negotiate group-specific identities, form relationships which span from the playfully antagonistic to the deeply romantic and which move between the network and face-to-face interaction, and create norms which serve to organize interaction and to maintain desirable social climates.

(Baym 1995:pg.161)

Group specific norms and values and affective ties are central points for both. Bender continues to focus on communal connections citing Max Weber's Theory of Social and Economic Organization (pg. 136). As the 'orientation of social action...based on a subjective feeling of the parties, whether affectual or traditional, that they belong together.' (Bender, pg. 9), it reinforces the idea of community as self-defined by those of the group. If they believe that together they constitute a group then they share emotional ties that create that feeling which constitutes the core of what creates 'community'. I stress this here as scholars who dismiss the concept of online community at times suggest that it does not matter if members of the community relate this sense 'that they belong together', if they do not meet particular criteria their sense of and the legitimacy of community is denied.

Geographic location is often stated or assumed as inherent in defining community. Daily, face to face interaction is seen as necessary to sustain trust and a network of ties and obligations. Bender references another scholar, Buber (1949) in Paths in Utopia, in his chapter defining community:

A real community need not consist of people who are perpetually together, but it must consist of people who, precisely because they are comrades, have mutual access to one another and are ready for one another.

(Bender 199: pg. 8)

Decades before the advent of the Internet and the effects globalization today, the value of the affective ties among members of a group were seen as being more central to understanding community than the actuality of physical location. Globalization, trans-nationalism, and diaspora studies have continued to show us that social ties of responsibility and obligations may reach across state and national boundaries (Axel 2004, Bernal 2005, Cohen 1996, Danforth 197, Grenier and Perez 2003, Hinnells 2005, Ignacio 2005). Technological advances have impacted

communication with exponential increases in quality, speed, and ease of access that can be used to tie separated members creating a convergence of opportunity and need. Technological advancement and the challenges it has presented to the perception and maintenance of ties of community have been well documented (Hine 2000, Howard and Jones 2004, Jones 1995). Many have opined on how the Internet removes the restrictions of space and time making the virtual world one that transcends physical boundaries (Bromberg 1996), an unbounded space removed from normal restrictions, for some a 'sacred space' to reconnect with the divine (Campbell 2005a, Dawson and Cowan 2004, O'Leary 1996). I propose that this decoupling of geography from a core role in defining community has opened up room in discussions for us to think of the Internet as a space for community. It also affects anthropological field methods in encouraging and continuing the trend begun in the 1980's of looking at multiple field sites rather than a single locus (Marcus 1995, Wittel 2000).

If affective ties between group members are a core component of community, how can the Internet act to create these ties? As an interactive venue, the Internet facilitates movement of information, money, and commodities that are shared, traded, bartered and sold. Images and symbols are borrowed, repackaged and reconfigured across boundaries of nation and ethnicity (Barber 2001). It is a world of self expression, a sharing of personal joys and tragedies, debates on the purpose of life, and ideologies of how the world should be shaped. This impacts how we understand social capital and its role in social bonding and community building; it also impacts the importance of physical locality in building social capital and social bonds that create community. Social capital centers on the connections between individuals, "...social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." (Putnam 2000:pg.19) We are presented again with the sense that community is created from links of mutual obligations and social ties. Remember Table 5 and the already growing sense of connectedness between individuals in the early years of the Internet. Henning and Lieberg (1996, pg. 22) point out, "Spatial proximity does not impact the quality of contacts, only the frequency of interaction" (Avenarius 2008:pg.154) Urban studies has thus found that alienation is not necessarily fostered by increased distance where communication exists, and social capital is built in trust and

interactions the feasibility of which the Internet supports. Distance then, when balanced by speed and richness of sensory input to convey emotive context coupled with the option for face to face interaction, is supportive of community building.

Current Research: Online Communities

...why argue about an online forum being a community or not?...Is there some power to be had in claiming a word like "community"? Might this debate be important in the context of a group's struggle for greater representation in the larger (potentially global) society?

(Watson 1997:pg.102)

Why do we agonize over the idea of online community? In the undue emphasis on physicality, in needing to 'verify' our 'truth' of observation, we have given undue emphasis on quantity over quality – duration of social ties over the tenor of communication along those social ties. As Watson and others have aptly conveyed in case studies, online groups offer individuals emotional and other benefits as well as a means of influencing the larger social fabric. "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." (Rheingold 1993:pg.5) A deeply illustrative example is David Weinberger's observation about the tremendous outpouring of emotional narrative online about the attacks on the twin towers on September 11, 2001 in New York: "Now, for the first time, the nation and the world could talk with itself, doing what humans do when the innocent suffer: cry, comfort, inform, and, most important, tell the story together."(Rainie, Clark, and Hoover 2001:pg.2). If one were to doubt this statement as being interpretive, the following by Marian is a direct communication of the sense of connection that individuals have come to understand through virtual relationships: "Although I had accessed the Internet before in a professional capacity, I entered virtual reality this time actively seeking communion with others." (Palandri and Green 2000:pg.633)

Cultural phenomena via computer mediated communication (CMC) is a growing research field increasingly embraced by social scientists whose methods have been in turn utilized to

produce case studies of virtual communities and addresses issues of online ethnography. Earlier work focused on the Internet as a tool for communication in the workplace (Hine 2000, Sproull and Kiesler 1991). In the 1990's (Etzioni and Etzioni 1999) the focus of discussion turned largely from validity of online community to evaluation of the impact of the Internet on the nature of social networks with community and identity becoming the focus of interdisciplinary studies (Lind 1999). Computer Mediated Communication and media studies in general were the first to recognize and redefine community and culture in light of the Internet (Jones 1995, Silver 2000). A variety of terms have entered into the common vocabulary of researchers from different disciplines: cyber culture (Levy 1997), virtual culture, online community (Etzioni and Etzioni 1999), virtual community (Etzioni and Etzioni 1999, Paccagnella 1997).

Jones (1995) posed the following challenge, "How will sociologists, ethnographers, communication scholars and anthropologists, for instance, grapple with issues related to studying electronic communities?" (pg. xvii) Researchers began answering this challenge by producing a rich set of ethnographic studies to understand how individuals and existing communities were incorporating the Internet into their daily lives as well as creating new social networks and communities (Baym 1995, Hampton and Wellman 2003, Hampton and Wellman 1999, Howard and Jones 2004, Jones 1998, Markham 1998, Miller and Slater 2003, Mitra 1997, Shaw 1997, Turkle 1995, Watson 1997) With the expansion of the Internet in the early 1990's, scholars began to focus on culture, identity, and online community as created, fragmented, and reconfigured through technology (Bromberg 1996, Fernback 1997, Howard and Jones 2004, Jones 1995, Jones 1998, Rheingold 1993, Shields 1996, Turkle 1995). Several scholars also began to note how the virtual shaped and 'inscribed' identity through use of avatars and other virtual 'bodies' such that 'technology as a mode of being' evolved (see Markham 1998 for an overview). Scholars then turned to developing tools of terminology and methodology to better gather information and understand the structure and complexity of the online experience, the ethics of online participant observation, and shifting perspectives between observer and observed (Beaulieu 2005, Beaulieu 2004, DiMaggio et al. 2001, Gatson and Zweerink 2004, Hine 2000, Hine 2008 , James and Busher 2006, Mann and Stewart 2004, Seymour 2001, Stewart and Williams 2005, Williams

2007, Witte 2004, Wittel 2000) One area that is emerging in importance is religion on the Internet, a many faceted phenomena only beginning to be explored. (Brasher 2001, Campbell 2005a, Campbell 2005b, Dawson and Cowan 2004, McKenna and West 2007, O'Leary 1996)

As mentioned earlier, the Internet was quickly seen as a space that would revolutionize social power structures. Several studies of marginal communities have been done that look closely at how the Internet provides a space for challenging the existing social order either directly or indirectly by creating spaces for those outside the mainstream, and how it provides a refuge encouraging and supporting group formation and cohesion (Amichai-Hamburger 2008, Futrell and Simi 2004, McLelland 2002, Simi and Futrell 2006). The concept of the Internet as "free space" linking separated communities has been well documented (Futrell and Simi 2004, Polletta 1999) This approach has been utilized in part in this study to understand the Zoroastrian community's efforts at strengthening bonds as a minority in at times hostile environments whose unique ethno-religious identity is being subjected to extreme stress from competing demands of diaspora and modernity.

Reality or Illusion

Indeed, the creation of new worlds is at the heart of what all new communication technologies seem to be destined for. Part of that creative process involves narrative, part involves technology, and part involves social interaction.

(Jones 1995:pg.4)

Creation and the creative process between individuals and technology are common themes (Baym 1995, Hine 2000, Jones 1995, Kelty 2005, Lopez-Gulliver, Sommerer, and Mignonneau 2002, Turkle 1984, Turkle 1995) As Turkle's pioneering work illustrated and others have since continued to consider, the Internet's fluidity and inherent capabilities for creation and exploration of identity as well as the corresponding option for anonymity or misdirection are intricately linked. One of the early concerns of scholars was that this creativity and an apparent disconnect from reality begged the question of authenticity. If the authenticity of an individual's identity is unanchored in physical presence - their words unsupported by body language - how would one separate possible 'illusion' created in the virtual world from 'reality'? By extension, how would one create authentic community in such an atmosphere?

Markham (1998), in noticing the dichotomy of 'real' vs. 'virtual' expressed by many scholars in approaching studies of the Internet, makes this a central thread of her online study. She underscores the nature and value of relationships as defined by participants and the emotional investment that they create. It is reminiscent of Bender's statement that community is an end in and of itself and the value of it is defined by those involved.

Sherie refused the distinction once more...In the same way, I asked Sherie how "real" her experiences in the Internet were. She replied, "how real are experiences off the Internet?...they're equivalent. they're not the same, but I'm still emotionally and intellectually invested in them, physically too even." "What do you mean?" I asked. "i get as emotionally upset and physically stressed over a flame war as i do over a conflict that i'm a part of." Again, Sherie rejected my efforts to separate online and offline experiences into real/not real distinctions...Sherie seemed to focus on the fact that selves or relationships exist, regardless of the context.

(Markham 1998: pg.207)

The distinction between real and virtual in many ways is only as valid as that made by the participants themselves.

Robins and Webster (2002) present a more cautious view of the dichotomy between 'real' and 'virtual'. They directly question Levy's (1997) utopian view of online communications that place a greater value on knowledge as created by the virtual- a "disembedded" knowledge – as versus the embedded knowledge anchored in 'territorialized' knowledge spaces set in real-world geographies. They state:

How is it, we would want to ask, that the 'new universe' of knowledge has come to seem more 'real' and meaningful than other – embodied and situated- kinds of knowing and engaging with the world?

(Robbins and Webster: pg. 240)

In their view cyberspace is a, "...sequestered space, one that has lost touch with the world's realities – and consequently functions according to the belief that the world in which most of us still want to live no longer has any reality." (pg. 241) Rheingold's description of his experiences in The Well alone would seem to counter Robins and Webster's monolithic characterization of online group interactions as socio-economic aggregations. Against the wealth of information being discovered, it seems clear that Robbins and Webster have collapsed all interests into one

monolithic sphere disregarding nuances of difference and the strong emotions and ties that some interests provoke.

Shared interests can create strong emotional bonds and obligations depending on the nature of the interest. Social movements, for example, revolve around common interests for change. Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) suggest that community entails a commitment at least in part of shared values, meanings and identity as well as a set of interrelated relationships that reinforce one another. So while a social movement may be focused primarily on a shared interest, the interaction online necessitates a dependency among individuals in the group to meet responsibilities and mutual need. Online communities then may be short lived having shifting boundaries that continually intersect others for a fluid movement of members as individual's interests and needs change. But they form nonetheless a community and cannot be solely evaluated on their duration and the fluidity of membership. We find then that it is no different in some ways than the shifting, contextualized boundaries of identity that Baumann (1996) observes offline.

The Internet as both technological and cultural phenomenon (Hine 2000, Mann and Stewart 2004, Wilson and Peterson 2002); this interaction and the socio-cultural impact and development of online community is linked in the concept of empowerment:

Empowerment is a concept that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems and proactive behavior to social policy and social change (Rappaport 1984). In other words, empowerment links the individual and his or her well-being to the wider social and political environment in which he or she functions. From a psychological perspective, empowerment links mental health and well-being to mutual help and to the creation of a responsive community (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Indeed, personal and social change relies extensively on various methods of empowerment (Bandura, 1988; Ozer & Bandura, 1990)

(Amichai-Hamburger 2008:pg.1776)

Empowerment does not occur in a vacuum of social bonds based merely on 'shared interest'. Social movements are about empowerment, building consensus and community around shared values, interests, and worldviews that then instigates and/or sustains change. Empowerment drives social movements that are aimed at building collective identity. Collective identity,

community, and communion converge in this sense of empowerment. McAdam notes this in the experience of volunteers for voter registration drives among African American communities in the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign, "The volunteers had discovered a powerful sociological truth: the most satisfying selves we well ever know are those that attach to communities and purposes outside our selves." (McAdam 1988:pg.138) Internet is a place of action and social process where individuals often engage in empowerment through sharing life events- births, deaths, sickness, relationships - and in contextualizing these among similar life events of others better understand their own. Like offline exchanges, that sense of empathy and membership in a group if only of shared experiences creates a pre-figurative space that acts as a prelude and motivation for face to face interactions such as the picnic and periodic gatherings (Rheingold1995), and small impromptu gatherings and conventions (Gatson and Zweerink 2004).

Robins and Webster (2002) base their argument against the strength of online community on a perceived lack of a "dynamic knowledge space. Yet the Internet is exactly that – a 'dynamic knowledge space' offering opportunities to establish connections. An early example is the 1993 implementation of email connections to the White House by the Clinton Administration in the United States:

Today...for the first time in history, the White House will be connected to you via electronic mail. Electronic mail will bring the Presidency and this Administration closer and make it more accessible to the people.

(Letter from the President and Vice president, June 1, 1993 White House announcement)

It placed heavy emphasis on the connections that would be established between the common person and the Administration and the accessibility it provided. The sense of connection through virtual communication is echoed time and again on various sites. Successful connectivity draws on authenticity of intent and interaction. The declaration on The Well's homepage illustrates this authenticity that is built into the accepted communal and cultural norms of the online group:

"Membership is not for everyone: partly because we are non-anonymous here. This means that as a member, you know the names of the people you're talking with and they know you, leading to real relationships."

(The Well, <http://www.well.com>: 2008)

This policy is the same as that adopted by the MainstreamZoroastrians Yahoo! group to preserve the legitimacy of the interactions and community ties as indicated in the disclaimer included at the bottom of all emails: "The MainstreamZoroastrians (MZ) is a private mailing list of and for voluntary members. Mails on MZ are confidential and for members only." Meaning is not inherent in the stream of electronic pieces of virtual communication, but "The meaning of the bits comes from the patterns which they make, from the software which is used to interpret them, and of course from the users who send and receive them" (Hine 2000: pg. 2) Behind all the 'bits' lie people who use them to create patterns of information that are mutually intelligible, that have social significance which taken as a whole comprises a distinct group culture. Material forms and their endowments of social and symbolic meaning guide the ways that technology and thus the virtual is used and understood in everyday life. Social obligations and interactions are extended from offline to online life and layered with similar social and symbolic significance. The familiar weave of human interaction is even more evident in the daily, organic evolution of social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and LunarStorm.

Today's Online Communities and Social Networking

It has become clear that the discussion is no longer about the validity of the existence of online communities, but about understanding how they are cultural constructions that contribute to identity construction, community building, and at times cultural change. Social networking sites take Hine's (2000) observation that web pages are less bounded and, in a wider array of applications coupled with the profile paradigm, further emphasize the highly integrated web of social networks that stretch across the Internet. They move beyond 'web spheres' (Schneider and Foot 2008) seen as groups of links that connect websites of similar interests and/or information together in a loose network; they now link individuals and groups in constant ripples of shifting interests and group memberships. These ripples, like interactions in the physical world, create intersecting spheres of influence and exchanges. Zaleski (1997) notes how this had already begun to impact the hierarchy of authority of religion as it moved online. These interlocking, intersecting spheres and the ability to 'surf' from one site to another produces a horizontal rather than vertical structuring of authority. This is a feature that more liberal Zoroastrian sites have

capitalized on to escape the structured authority of a hereditary, orthodox priesthood that would restrict membership as will be discussed in greater detail

The map in Figure 2 is a humorous and instructive look at the world of online social networking sites. It is instructive in that it reminds us that the virtual online communities that are created within these social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Lunarstorm, and others have boundaries that are reflected in the shared interests, political views, and activities they engage in. In the embodiment of these sites as 'countries', we are reminded of the reproduction of culture and community.

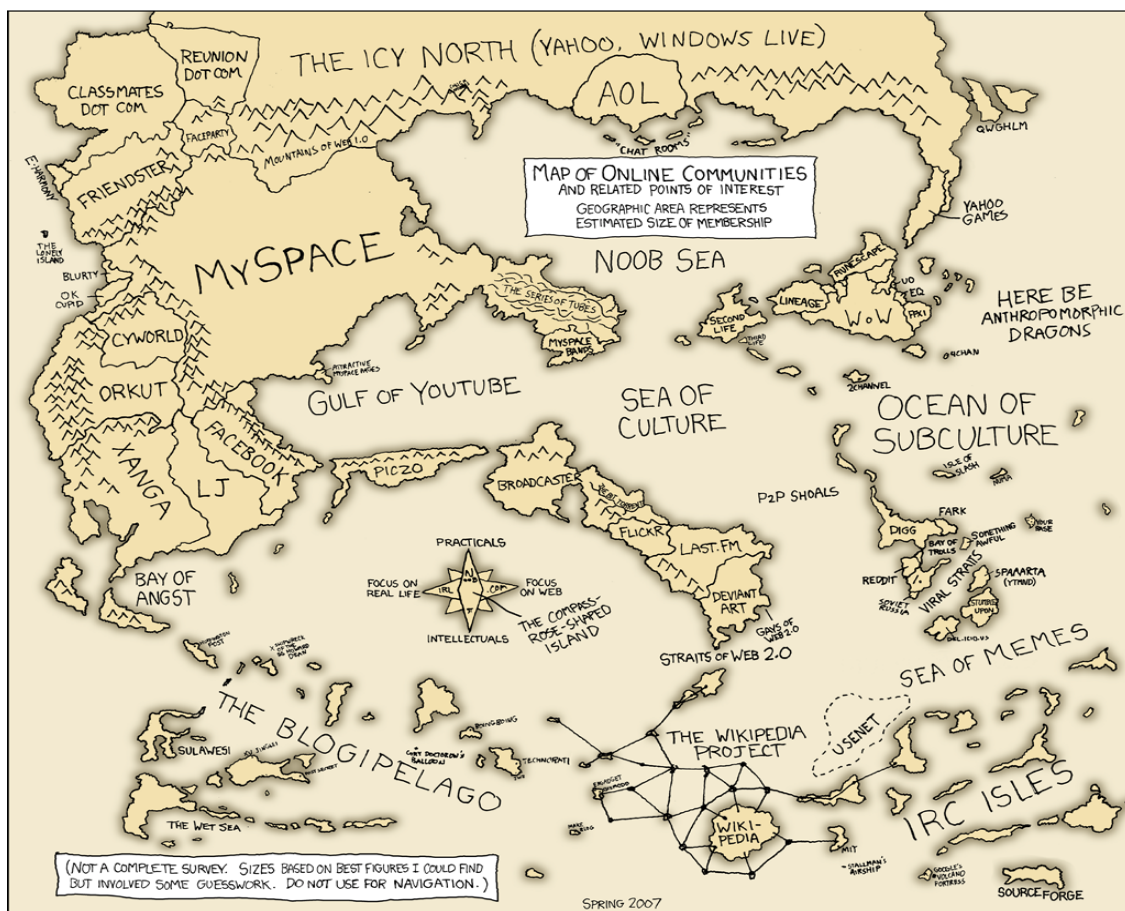


Figure 4 "Map" of Internet Social Sites

(printed with permission: <http://xkcd.com>)

Boyd and Ellison (2007) offer a detailed and instructive look at the definition, history, and scholarship that has been done on social networking sites which I will rely on here to give a brief overview. The embeddedness of the virtual in social networks is exemplified in one of the unique features of social networking sites: their articulation and visible embodiment of social networks through Friend's lists. Profile pages allow the user to employ a variety of features such as video and photo sharing, built in blogging, instant messaging, and audio recordings to share and strengthen world views. Profile pages are unique constructions allowing users to 'type oneself into being' as Sundén 2003 vividly notes. (Boyd and Ellison 2007: pg.2) Some sites are designed specifically for 'identity-driven' categories that center on ethnicity, religion, political agendas, or sexual orientation. Ning is a recent platform that encourages the development of groups that have a specific focus such as Paganism for example. Dogster and Catster allow owners to create profiles specifically for their pets. Sites like Twitter interface with mobile technology so that individuals can stay in touch with friends even while away from the computer.

One of the most significant points that they make about their scholarship and that of others in a special issue on social networking sites is that these sites are primarily organized around people, not interests. Herein lays the continual evolution of the interaction between technology and individuals in creating culture and cultural artifact. Additionally, the inevitable link between offline and online lives and the interaction of the two is dramatically illustrated in the collapse of social contexts. With sites like MySpace and Facebook users are suddenly faced with bosses and former acquaintances as well as close friends. Many now create public and private profiles as employers ask for and search profiles to gain insight into potential or current employee beliefs and actions – herein identity is on display. Many of these sites are identity driven according to perceived membership by ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, and cultural affiliation. In all there are a variety of roles, as in offline communities, that members take in participating in the social evolution of the network of individuals. They may be 'passive members, inviters, and linkers' (Boyd and Ellison 2007: pg. 10) The communities are fluid organisms with traditionally a general hierarchy of authority embodied in the moderator. As Rheingold (1995) discusses in a dedicated community the membership also polices itself applying sanctions, even if it only be

ostracism, where behavior is unacceptable and threatens the security and social fabric that is established within the accepted norms online. This is very true of social networking sites which monitor for abusive language in public forums and establish varying guidelines for erotic and nude images that follow the same reasons that offline communities monitor such behavior. There is a definite sense of public and private and what are appropriate displays of behavior. Concerns about online predators and the presence of minors on open sites also encourage the implementation of social norms, restrictions, and codes of behavior. As will be seen in chapter vi, the social networking site of Z-book created for Zoroastrians debates similar issues of socially acceptable behavior. This is complicated in part by its religious identity and the membership of both liberal and traditional Zoroastrians that carry offline debates of ritual, intermarriage, and conversion as well as social events and professional networking to this social space where some wish to remove the religious aspect completely. The sometimes acrimonious exchanges highlight the conflict created in trying to excise religion from ethnicity in Zoroastrian identity.

Anthropology and the Internet: CyberAnthropology

Scholars note anthropology's early reluctance to embrace the Internet and address Jones' (1995) challenge of grappling with electronic communities (Dickey 1997, Schwimmer 1996, Stone 1997, Stone 1998, Wilson and Peterson 2002). Initially the Internet was a tool to enhance conventional scholarship rather than a means of creating new scholarship or as a new form of field site. New technology offered faster and wider communication through e-mail discussion lists, USENET newsgroups, online journals, and digitized sound and visual aids to expand on the impact of traditional scholarship. Traditional theory on community, culture and the very nature of ethnography defined the locus of social interaction as face to face with other media being supplementary. Media was peripheral to culture; technology in general often was seen as a context, showcase, and reproduction of culture. At the same time mass media studies recognized the power of television and film for example to create a narrative, a story, to shape perceptions of identity and by extension community (Dickey 1997, Ginsberg 1994, Goethals 1981). It seems paradoxical that anthropologists were so reluctant to embrace the concept of community online. It

is interesting to note that even with this seeming lack of interest ANTHRO-L, a general anthropology list distributed from the State University of New York, Buffalo, had threads that discussed the possibility of online groups constituting a community (Schwimmer 1996, pg 562).

Others quickly recognized anthropology as a discipline 'well-placed' for the study of online communities (Escobar 1994, Escobar 1995, Wilson and Peterson 2002). Axel (2004) emphasizes that the Internet 'compel(s) anthropologists to rethink their disciplinary procedures of knowledge production'. (pg. 26) Steadily the Internet has become seen as a cultural construct and culture in and of itself rather than simply a tool. Combined with the redefining of community as decoupled from set geographic boundaries and multiple field sites becoming a valid paradigm under the impact of trans-nationalism and diaspora rather than restricted to a single limited location, there has been created room to consider the Internet as another place/space to discover cultural practices, identity formation, knowledge production, and religious practices. Within two years of the Internet's introduction, Escobar (1994) was heralding it as a 'new domain' in anthropological studies:

The study of cyberculture is particularly concerned with the cultural constructions and reconstructions on which the new technologies are based and which they in turn help to shape...any technology represents a cultural invention, in the sense that it brings forth a world; it emerges out of particular cultural conditions and in turn helps to create new ones.

(Escobar 1994: pg. 211)

Early efforts to grapple with and study the impacts of the Internet and virtual communications emerged as the anthropology of technoscience (Escobar 1994, Hakken 2001), anthropology of science and technology, cyborganthropology, cyberanthropology, anthropology of cyberspace and cyberculture (Escobar 1994, Escobar 1995). One of the first formal projects to strengthen recognition of these studies was a two-panel session at the AAA meetings in 1992 (Escobar 1994). Hakken, Escobar, and David Hess in commentary of Escobar underscore the difficulties of establishing these studies. Their importance lies in understanding social formation reproduction which is a cross disciplinary field where,

Its distinctive feature is a special kind of knowledge networking, a seamless dialectic between production of certain privileged symbolic representations of the character of various "realities" [science] and the construction of special artifacts [technology] used in related practices/performances.

(Hakken 2001: pg. 535)

Within a growing acceptance as a valid arena of study, researchers have been faced with the task of fitting it into existing theory and creating new theoretical perspectives to explain virtual phenomenon. Some interpret it as a derivative of existing social communication as discussed by Axel (2004, 2007). The Internet also became interpreted as a tool that individuals used to extend a self already developed and to create ties with others of the same world view. Axel cautions that it is more than a 'simple derivative' of existing social communication and I would add social structures. Anthropologists and others must keep in mind that the Internet, as a 'new mode of subjectification' may be used to transmit a focused/limited identity facet as in Axel's case study of Sikh torture and martyrdom. In this way it can be used to shape identity in selective presentations of tradition and belief. Wittel (2000) draws on the sociologist and communications scholar Castells' (1996) concepts of ethnography of 'fields' vs. one of 'networks' to illustrate the methodological shift to ethnographies of multiple field sites that focus on the connections and flows of ideas and people and a view of contextualized culture for a decentered notion of 'field' among others in reevaluation anthropological approaches to ethnography with the challenge of the Internet.

A search of databases for 'community', 'ethnography' and other standard terminology within anthropology reveals hundreds if not thousands of entries testifying to the well established place they have in the field. Earlier discussions of Hakken and Escobar highlight the birth pains of this growing field of interest and its position perched between interest studies and a true subdiscipline. I would claim that it is still not mainstream within anthropology, but the growing scholarship summarized by Escobar (1994), Wilson and Peterson (2002), and virtual ethnographies such as those of Bernal (2005), Guimarães (2005) and others highlighted variously through out this discussion point to its growing importance in a world of constant movement of

peoples, globalization, and struggles for control of national identity and independence for minority ethnicities and religious enclaves that crave a homeland of their own.

Virtual Ethnography

An ethnography of the Internet can look in detail at the ways in which the technology is experienced in use. In its basic form ethnography consists of a researcher spending an extended period of time immersed in a field setting, taking account of the relationships, activities and understandings of those in the setting and participating in those processes. The aim is to make explicit the taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives.

(Hine 2000:pg.4)

Culture is the how and means of 'people make(ing) sense of their lives'. In that culture is created and reproduced online, so too can ethnography be practiced online moving through the same avenues of communication and experience. Ethnography has been the cornerstone of anthropology. The boundaries of the field site are defined by the researcher who deliberately picks themselves up out of their customary life and rhythm to put themselves in a physical space literally and figuratively set apart by different sounds, sights, customs and perspectives of the world. On his/her return a story of different customs and world view is recounted. It can be seen as a rite of passage both for the researcher and ideally for those reading the account. One need only think on the customary stories in anthropological literature of culture shock and disorientation and Van Gennep's 'separation, liminality, and reincorporation are evident (Van Gennep 1960). Ethnography then is a separation from family and friends, a liminal period in the field, and reintegration through the process of storytelling to make sense of events and shift the status of anthropologist from 'outsider' back to 'insider'. The legitimacy of the story rests on several considerations: the reality of lived field experience, the authority of the speaker, the authority and legitimacy of informants, and a holistic experience. Ethnography's authority has relied traditionally on '...travel, experience and interaction.'" (Hine 2000:pg. 44)

It has been implicit, until recently, that field work then is a face-to-face event where ethnographic methods walk the balance between reflexive engagement and passive observation in an attempt to create a holistic experience while preserving an objective distance. Participation and interaction confirm an experience grounded in a physical locality, a bounded space with

assumptions of prolonged living at the field site with observations, interviews, photographs or some form of visual representation of life lived in the midst of others' lives. These expectations extend to learning local skills, techniques and ideally collecting samples of local art, tools, and clothing – any tangible evidence of a lived experience. The authority of the speaker/researcher is grounded in a 'conceptual distance' which again has been assumed as only possible by physically leaving behind accepted routines and perspectives and immersing oneself in those wholly different. The authority and legitimacy of the informant(s) is critical to the success of the story – if one cannot watch the face of the speaker, watch how they interact with others in the community then how can one be sure that they are telling the truth as they know it. Interaction at the site of the defined community allows the researcher to validate the authenticity of their facts. Finally, the story is expected to be a complete account of life in the community, a sense of a representative picture of the 'other'.

This brings up two issues that must be addressed in moving from ethnographic studies at a physical location to one that is located in the virtual world. First, Hine (2000) discusses how the ethnographer must involve themselves in online activities of a community so as to immerse themselves in the equivalent of day to day activities. As Markham noted,

...I found myself struggling to force our interaction to fit into my made-for-face-to-face interview protocol template. ...it seems I wanted to simply to add online interaction to my research procedures; but the more I talked with Beth, the more I realized that merely incorporating online interaction into my research efforts as a tool to collect texts wasn't working very smoothly...this wasn't just a tool to study the context, it was the context of the study.

(Markham 1998: pg. 89)

Markham discovered that to understand the community she was watching meant that she had to participate online, learn the language and skills to navigate the environment, engage in building relationships to better understand the process of building emotional connections and life online. Another issue that Hine (2000) also touches on is the relevance of offline behavior to online behavior touching on the reality and authenticity of online interactions returning us to a premise grounding the privileged place of face-to-face ethnography. "If one cannot watch the face of the speaker, watch how they interact with others in the community then how can one be sure that

they are telling the truth as they know it?" However, if one is seeking to understand the identity and behavior of individuals online, then it is precisely the online interactions and establishments of relationships that is priority. The research question itself dictates in some contexts that offline actions are extraneous. In some, it requires an equal understanding of both and how they may interact.

This study seeks first to map out the presence of Zoroastrians online, understand their perceptions of value, and then begin to understand how expressions of identity. To better understand better then the relationships, activities and identity evolving for the Zoroastrian community online, the ethnographer must be present in the online environment to take, "account of the relationships, activities and understandings of those in the setting and participating in those processes" as Hines suggests. Researchers have come to realize that the Internet is a cultural arena (Guimarães Jr. 2008 , Hine 2000, Hine 2008 , Mann and Stewart 2004). As Mann and Stewart (pg. 7) state, "...the Internet is both a technological and a cultural phenomenon." This phenomenon creates a dialectic between on and offline events, perspectives, and interactions that we must recognize for their dialogue which contributes to identity creation. The study question thus directs that online participation is integral and authentic; to better realize how the Internet impacts identity, further research into offline identity will also be necessary to make comparisons and understand changes that the Internet may be creating. Rheingold illustrates this interaction vividly in recounting how the Well community organized a picnic and his intense reactions of excitement and curiosity at meeting 'strangers' for the first time that he had shared intense experiences with online and considered friends. This experience was often in the back of my mind as I met Zoroastrians online and hoped to have the opportunity to meet them in person, watched conversations online that introduced Zoroastrians from around the world and watched announcements for meetings and conferences. Participant observation strongly brings home the truth of Wilson & Peterson's statement that, "...the recursive relationship between virtual & offline interactions cannot be ignored." (pg. 454) Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) illustrate the benefits to be gained from a hybrid approach that captures both the emotive richness of face to face ethnography as well as the richness of computer mediated communication.

Physical field sites are fairly easily bounded so that the researcher has clear demarcations of opportunities for information gathering, resource management, and helps reduce factors that would overwhelm and complicate the focus of the research question. The fluid nature of the Internet creates an ever expanding field site. This presents the challenge of an ever evolving set of complexities and expanding sources of information and new and exciting places to explore and individuals to meet. This presented two assets and an additional challenge for this study. The public nature and intricate web of far reaching, interconnecting social networks online means that word travels much more quickly than in a traditional field site. This phenomenon is described as webs spheres that trace social linkages often reflecting similar worldviews, ideology, and interests (Schneider and Foot 2008). Introductions are much more critical as first impressions have a much greater impact on whether individuals and ultimately the community will be willing to engage in conversation. This very challenge if handled with care and consideration for respondent's perspectives and sensibilities offers a much greater flexibility as well.

Planning a virtual ethnography entails much of the same planning as traditional ethnographic research but calls for rather different approaches. If the virtual ethnography does not include a face to face component the researcher is challenged to use a variety of online sources that incorporate visual and audio options. As the virtual arena relies more heavily on text communication, a familiarity with common "Netiquette" such as abbreviations (i.e. lol) and graphic symbols that are commonly used to denote emotional overlays to the text is critical to following nuances of meaning and intent. Technology such as chat rooms and IM can be utilized to conduct interviews as well as synchronous virtual conferences though these are best run by moderators with training. The following is a list of challenges and advantages of qualitative research using the Internet drawn from Mann & Stewart (2000, Ch. 2).

Advantages:

- Extending Access to Participants
- Wide Geographical Access
- Access to Hard to Reach Populations- eg. Mothers at home, individuals with disabilities, medical concerns.

- Closed Site Access- eg. Hospitals, religious communities, military, groups with different visible attributes: gender, social strata etc.
- Sensitive issues – instances where participants may be reluctant to discuss face to face.
- Identify and access groups with specific interests
- Savings in Cost and Time
- Eases demands of locating convenient venue for participants
- Reduces transcription, recording costs. Text already produced, reduces issues of mis-representation, reduces transcription bias and researcher interpretation overlay on participant intent.
- Data tracking and coding is facilitated
- Safe environment for marginalized groups

Challenges:

- Computer literacy (both for interviewer and respondent)
- Focus Group Moderator Training: time and cost
- Development of skill set for contacting and recruiting participants
- Need to research legal and ethical considerations, consent forms.
- Difficulty in providing rewards for participation/ co-operation.
- Need to develop interactive skills online: familiarize oneself to Netiquette.
- Loss of access to participants due to movements of personal accounts, loss of participant access to network etc.
- Nature of technology-skill and cost- limits participant pool to particular gender, socio-economic level etc. in some areas.

Ethics and the ability to apply traditional logic and technique has been the focus of much virtual ethnography even when they are specific case studies. Even in case studies, scholars have been tightly focused on a sense of 'culture shock', but often overshadowing the traditional feelings of interacting with a different set of norms and worldviews is a sense of adjustment to the subtle differences in being in the online environment. One is home, but not home in working within one's own culture and environment while simultaneously interacting with others who may live on the other side of the globe. Scholars have turned to refining approaches for online studies to develop techniques for capturing a clearer view of cultural development and interactions as created in virtual reality. Studies have turned to avatars in identity work, mapping out social networks through web spheres for example. Hine (2005) approaches virtual ethnographic methodology

through drawing together several authors who present various case studies, some which have been referenced throughout this study. Working from a micro, macro, and mezzo level, (Jankowski and van Selm 2008) scholars can further refine these techniques to begin developing an understanding of how the virtual world and the physical interact and perhaps build predictive techniques to explain how cultural groups move between these two realities.

Online Zoroastrian Community: Current Research

To date, with the exception of John Hinnells' work, there has been no systematic look at the social dynamics of Zoroastrian use of the Internet (Hinnells 2005). The ensuing years since Hinnells' overview has only served to confirm and strengthen his observations. He makes several points that will be used as a roadmap for comparing and evaluating current Zoroastrian Internet sites.

As he points out, sites are fluid - appearing, disappearing, becoming inactive, undergoing continual revision, redesign and additions. Almost all of the sites that he reviews are still operating and have been joined by numerous others. The site at Stanford that Hinnells refers to as one of the 'earliest effective sites' was still in place though inactive when this study began in 2004. Today in 2009 it is the only site that has been archived²¹. Three sites that I identified in 2004 are no longer online, and less than six are online but inactive. This I believe is a testimony to the value Zoroastrians find in their sites as well as the commitment of the community to utilizing technology to improve links between members and the fierce commitment to debating concerns. There is a continuing use of transitory and long term chat rooms and lists that are created sometimes for only a single debate or incident in which individuals argue passionately and fiercely for values and tenets held to be sacred and inviolate.

Hinnells succinctly documents the spectrum of Zoroastrian sites. They continue to span a spectrum from orthodox sites such as the World of Traditional Zoroastrianism through more liberal sites such as the Zarathushtrian Assembly as well as those by converts such as Ron Delavega's Zoroastrianism.cc. The Swedish liberal site the Zoroastrian Community has come down several times over the last few years, but appears to be the only site with noticeable

fluctuations in presence. There are now additional sites that actively champion conversion and, based on conversations on the orthodox list MainstreamZoroastrians, the growth of liberal sites has far outpaced those of the orthodox perspective. A strong new site is the World Alliance of Parsi Irani Zarathoshtis (WAPIZ) established to 'strengthen the Voice of Tradition'. Hinnells maintains that the websites are most often the point of view of a single perspective with relatively little engaged dialogue. They are platforms for presenting a particular worldview, a particular set of tenets and beliefs. This continues to be the case for most sites; however, newer sites have begun to take a more neutral stance as news portals.

Intermarriage and conversion continue to be central issues of debate and identity on Zoroastrian sites. The debates that arise continue to be as passionate as Hinnells documents from research in 2002. Rituals and practices of worship continue to be documented online on sites and on list groups. One of the most important issues that Hinnells documents is the core differences in worldview between traditionalists and reformists which is at the heart of discussions of identity. For traditional Zoroastrians their religion and heritage is being appropriated and 'hijacked', for reformists the vision of Zarathushtra is being reduced to an exclusionist racial phenomenon.

What then does this study add to the information Hinnells documents? One of the aims is to add time depth to our understanding of Zoroastrian sites- how have they perhaps changed and evolved, grown or declined. Another is to gain a clearer understanding of the users of these sites and to delve deeper into an understanding of the impact of the Internet on Zoroastrians and if they have indeed established a third wave of diaspora into the virtual world. The Zoroastrian sites he describes function very much as a tool for communication, what of its sense of sacred space and how does it compare perhaps to other religions online? Finally, how does contemporary Zoroastrianism appear online? Is it essentially a group with a continuum of varying theology, does it follow traditional Zoroastrianism with an internal focus on community issues and preserving ethno-religious identity, does it reach out and seek to draw others in utilizing the Internet to proselytize, or perhaps a variation of these is presented to the world online.

Interpretive Frameworks

There are several theoretical frameworks that assist in understanding the online Zoroastrian experience and how it is shaping identity. They also help place this within the wider context of human experience. I have utilized five theoretical frameworks as the study progressed to structure an understanding of the information generated from online interactions and information from Zoroastrian websites:

1. Internet as a tool, space, or place (Markham 1998)
2. Internet as a conceptual and experimental space (Campbell 2005)
3. Social movement theory with a further focus on 'free space' and transmovement space as it has been applied to Internet studies (Futrell & Polletta's work)
4. Social movement theory as it examines collective identity in diffuse, non-institutional contexts. (Haenfler 2004)
5. Internet as sacred space or secular space

Markham created a general way of measuring the intensity of an individual's involvement online through her insight on degrees of involvement of the self and identity: "...computer-mediated communication appears to be experienced along a continuum: For some, the Internet is simply a useful communication medium, a tool; for others, cyberspace is a place to go to be with others. For still others, online communication is integral to being and is inseparable from the performance of self, both online and offline." (pg. 20) Campbell (2005a) further refines Markham and Agre (1998)²² to look at the Internet through the following categories of Internet use as:

- Information space (utilitarian)
- Common mental geography-worldviews (conceptual)
- Identity Workshop (experimental)
- Social Space (social networking)

As in Markham's categories, the Internet can be seen as a tool and as a place captured in Campbell's utilitarian category. As illustrated in a review of Zoroastrian resource sites and in comments from individuals online about their perceived value in their use of the Internet, it is seen as a space to access and share information. A unique feature of this space, unlike other media, is the interactive capability such that one is both publisher and user. This has been commented on

by Rheingold (1993), Hine (2000) and others as well. Hine presents this inherent capability as an interaction of technology and cultural forces as well. Campbell draws into this category the phenomenon of inscribed selves referred to by Markham though Campbell draws on it through Nunes (1995) and his statement that our words are our bodies' in the process of individuals becoming 'known' and envisioned as individuals through their words or taglines. This particular aspect surfaces to some extent in email lists where some people always sign off with a particular phrase that becomes representative of them. Z-book also appears to have some of these features as it utilizes a user profile with a characteristic avatar image.

Campbell further highlights the conceptual and experimental aspects to bring a greater focus on the activities individuals engage in. As common mental geography, the Internet can be used to construct a common worldview. This is echoed in (Boyd and Ellison 2007); the focus on building a worldview that is common and within a group and can be accessed and related to lies at the heart of building communities of affirmation which is a key aspect of Zoroastrian Internet usage. This also speaks directly to identity and defining what 'Zoroastrian' represents for those who use the Internet to debate community issues and for non-users who may use Zoroastrian sites to gain information about this religion and culture.

The last two aspects of 'Identity Workshop' and 'Social Space' speak directly to the ideas of identity and social networking that have become growing factors in Zoroastrian Internet usage as well as illustrate differences in their perceptions of value in its use. She describes identity workshop as many others do in that it is a place to experiment with ways of being and perceiving self. It 'unties the mind from the body'. Zoroastrians online, in their sense of the Internet as a tool and resource stay 'embodied' and identity work is focused on embodied facts – does a Zoroastrian follow only the Gathas or the entirety of the Avesta, can a 'true' Zoroastrian marry outside the community, can one convert, what are the merits of a particular translation, must one wash each time before entering the Atash Behram or always wear one's kushti and sudreh? Social space is summed up in the focus on making connections with people. As discussed earlier, social networks are represented and often expanded. Here community building is a primary focus. Campbell makes the observation that seeing the Internet as social space allows

researchers to interact and perceive it as 'an experimental observation sphere'. From this vantage point, the researchers presence and participation in social networking groups and in email lists is similar to traditional participant observation.

Collective identity, a group's sense of, "'we' rooted in perceptions of commonality and solidarity" (Futrell & Simi 2004, pg. 1) may lie in bonds of ethnicity, religion, activism, nationalism, shared behavioral practices created by culture, language and a host of other measures of community. Sociologists have used a variety of terms such as 'free space' (Futrell and Simi 2004, Polletta 1999) to describe spaces of autonomy from dominant groups in order to develop and sustain 'oppositional movement' identities. Polletta (1999) identifies four important features:

...free spaces and their analogues refer to small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization.

(Polletta 1999: pg. 1)

These features are important to keep in mind in looking at marginal voices in the Zoroastrian community to understand the impact the Internet may have on the longevity of future changes to the community. Free spaces are small-scale, removed from control by the dominant group, voluntary, and generate cultural change that is involved with political mobilization. Some Zoroastrian spaces fit 99% of this definition. The one area in which they deviate is cultural change accompanied by political mobilization. A distinct lack of political mobilization is a fundamental area that makes them unique. Shortly I will suggest that this is in part because they fit Haenfler's description of social movement in a diffuse, non-institutional context which is focused on group identity as a means of individual improvement that does not necessarily need to expand boundaries to include others.

I propose that this perspective is applicable to any group that struggles for acceptance, recognition, and/or legitimacy either in intra- or inter-group relations which has been the focus of anthropological studies of ethnicity and cultural cohesiveness and sustainability in multicultural settings (Melville 1983). This is particularly applicable in understanding the interactions between traditional, orthodox Zoroastrians and those of the restorationist, reformist perspective.

Restorationists and even extremely traditional perspectives struggle to find a place where they feel free to voice their frustrations, their particular stands on contentious debates and to do so with like-minded people. Community often embodies acceptance. We seek to be with those who support our decisions and choices. We also seek community to have a place to voice opinions and encourage actions seen to be necessary for group identity. Diaspora communities in particular must often reach across great divides of nationalism and geographic distance to maintain a sense of 'we'. This would suggest that the Internet would be a natural arena for such groups to establish a presence to link far flung communities. Just as Futrell & Simi argue that 'small, locally-bound, interpersonal networks' or 'indigenous-prefigurative spaces' cannot in and of themselves provide the social network to maintain an activist culture beyond these limited boundaries, so too must trans-national and diaspora movements seek a space of refuge from the pressures of assimilation and acculturation.

The Zoroastrian community, faced with a second and more widely dispersed diaspora, often appears to struggle to adopt a single definition and even a set of self reference terms limited to two or three dependent on geographic origin to define the boundaries of their culture, their beliefs, and their inner boundaries that define who will receive the privileges and rights of membership. It works as a means to hold together the quickly expanding diaspora to preserve a sense of cohesiveness and a link to the past. They face a dual threat from a dubious position of historical prestige and legitimacy as a minority religion in an Islamic society within Iran where conversion to the faith would bring retribution as well as from struggles within for ascendancy by differing schools of theological and philosophical perspectives. I believe that in the increasing embeddedness of contemporary and liberal Internet sites in the life of the Zoroastrian global community if only as a space to debate, the Zoroastrian community as a whole is experiencing a third Diaspora into the virtual world. The Internet thus provides communication among members of similar views largely without the sanction of others except the group itself and it creates conditions that promote collective identity through communities of affirmation. It provides a way, a free space for some more marginal groups to establish a voice that might not have developed

due to isolation from wide dispersal – one individual in one community, a couple of others in another a great distance away prevents them from working together to push forward agendas.

The complexities and nuances of social dynamics that occur on Zoroastrian Internet sites is illuminated in part by looking at the structure of collective action, orchestrated by collective identity, in diffuse, noninstitutional situations. Haenfler (2004: pg. 786) notes that, "...a strong collective identity is the foundation of diffuse movements, providing 'structure,' a basis for commitment, and guidelines for participation." She further lays out the changes in New Social Movement theory that is of particular interest from an anthropological point of view:

NSM theorists have brought renewed attention to culture, lifestyle, expressive action, ideology, grievance construction, the micro level of movement activity, and the connection between individual and collective identity. They distinguish between older, class-based labor movements and more contemporary, identity-centered political challenges such as the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and gay and lesbian liberation. NSMs concern themselves...and culturally oriented challenges (Touraine 1985). They are often reformist rather than revolutionary (Cohen 1985) and issue symbolic challenges focused on civil society as much as or more than the state (Mclucci 1985)

(Haenfler 2004: pg. 786)

Of particular interest is the focus on culture, ideology, the micro level of movement activity, and links between individual and collective identity. These are very much the focus of restoration groups that claim the Zoroastrian identity and look to redefine the role and characteristics of the individual as it relates to collective identity. Restorationist sites such as Ronald Delavega's and Jafarey's expand the boundaries of qualified individuals from those born of Zoroastrian parents to any who choose to follow Zarathushtra's teachings. Ethnicity is no longer a necessary component of individual and collective identity. Ideology is debated, changes to ritual and religious practice impact cultural norms and models of behavior. It is firmly a reformist movement as are other liberal Zoroastrians that push for some changes but may preserve ethnicity for example as criteria for claiming Zoroastrian identity. In its focus on civil society and symbolic challenges such as modification of the fravahor image on websites, it explains the surprising lack of Zoroastrian agitation for political change to engage and protect the community from challenges perceived by fundamentalist concerns.

One final theoretical lens for understanding Zoroastrian activity on the Internet is looking for signs of use of the virtual as sacred space. Campbell (2005a) clearly notes the use of the Internet as sacred space by religious groups. Reference has also been made in discussing religion as a boundary marker of identity. When applying this measure to Zoroastrian presence online, it is conspicuously lacking in 'cyber-cathedrals' (Campbell 2005a), 'virtual shrines' (Brasher 2001), with only two cyber temples to be found online. One of these is at ---- and a second created in 2009 by Ronald Delavega at ----. Both of these sites are on liberal, restorationist sites and signal a clear difference between the two groups. I believe that this reinforces the interpretation of traditional Zoroastrian usage of the Internet as a means of maintaining communication and strengthening identity and not as a place of worship which is incompatible with the strong tradition of communal ritual. It also signals a clear evolution of a group that will claim Zoroastrian identity but will pursue a more externally focused religious practice that seeks to radically change Zoroastrian identity in actively seeking to change patterns of worship and include a wider range of individuals. This is again in marked contrast to liberal voices that seek for more flexibility in religious identification and practice without making widespread alterations.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS: ZOROASTRIAN ETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE ONLINE

The following ethnographic narrative speaks to the core of historical and orthodox Zoroastrian identity as well as the emerging definitions by voices seeking to break away from a historical identity grounded in a prophetic, ritualized tradition. This chapter relies almost wholly on online narrative; traditional sources will be utilized where they enhance our understanding by filling in gaps or clarify doctrine and practice. This also allows us to consider the issue of representativeness and online versus offline voices of the community. To address the central argument that the Internet is responsible for strengthening and changing the face of Zoroastrianism, it is necessary to provide a foundational, historical context to judge present identity against. Current transformations of Zoroastrian identity have roots in perceived historical identity created through the convergence of oral tradition and recorded text. It must always be kept in mind that history provides the fabric for culture and is the narrative material that members use to legitimize practices, rationalize doctrine, enhance community identity and image, seek empathy, and use often as a polemic against invading Muslims and descendants as well as Zoroastrians that do not follow their understanding of Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. Factors that enhance and those that undermine Zoroastrian community cohesion and thus identity lie in the history of persecution, diaspora, and revitalization efforts that have lead to a reliance on retelling that history to renew interest by youth, isolated individuals, and isolated groups of Zoroastrians within larger dominant social groups. The respect of those around them is often sought to help protect their boundaries; Parsis are especially proud of the respect others in India give them for the reputations they have earned in centuries of interaction. Diasporas initiate transformations, and with a transformation of identity and perception of one's place in the greater social structure often comes a transformation in terms of self reference. It is then necessary to

also consider the meanings the term 'Zoroastrian' holds for the community and other terms that are used within the group.

As an ethno-religious minority - What do they practice, how do they practice, how is ethnicity entwined with religion? What is the historical identity composed of traditions and doctrine that guide the everyday lives of many Zoroastrians? The Internet adds an additional dimension to these questions in how sites are designed both for co-religionists and the non-Zoroastrian visitor as well as by co-religionists and non-Zoroastrians. To speak to co-religionists, websites present a synopsis of historical highlights, photographic and textual dedications to community leaders, exemplary images of observances and celebrations, and familiar images of the religion such as Zarathushtra, the fravahar²³, and fire that the authors feel define and are symbols of Zoroastrianism. This is closely linked to their functions as cultural and religious preservation sites presenting articles and lectures on sacred texts, doctrine, and tradition. Through educating members, they seek to strengthen commitment to being Zoroastrian as well as educate non-Zoroastrians. One webmaster stated responding to the online survey asking why the site had been created, "To be able to give a true picture of Zarathushtism in a world where it is the most misunderstood philosophy/religion." This information also serves to inform non-Zoroastrian visitors about the religion and culture; it is supplemented by a general summary of who Zarathushtra was, his teachings about the nature of Ahura Mazda or "Wise Lord", and humanity's role in the struggle between good and evil. The variations of Zoroastrian identity and worldview are mapped out in the differences of recognized scriptural authority, ritual practice and the legitimacy of conversion based on differing interpretations of Zarathushtra's teachings. These different agencies find voice and a tool to shape their world online. To develop a nuanced portrait of Zoroastrian identity key areas of focus in presenting online ethnographic narrative will be:

1. issues of Zoroastrian identity shaped through and by schools of religious thought and terms of self reference as presented online
2. historical overview of the Diaspora with a focus on events that spurred developing variations of Zoroastrian thought
3. the community in the 20th and 21st century-dialogue, controversy, revitalization, preservation
4. creation of living history online as affirmation and tool in online discussions

.General Overview of Zoroastrianism: Voices Online

While there are variances in communal presentations of the religion online and on historical dates, the core features of the religion and culture are the same as that offline and in scholarly work. The Zoroastrian religion is acknowledged as the oldest monotheistic world religion originating in the Inner Asian steppes in approximately 1500/1600 B.C. (Boyce 2004, Choksy 2002) and became the state religion of three Persian empires from 549-330 B.C., 248-224 A.D., and 224-652 A.D.. A prophetic religion founded by Zarathushtra whose fundamental tenet is Humata, Hukhta, Huvareshtha or “Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds”, it has greatly influenced Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It is believed to be the source of concepts such as Heaven and Hell, individual judgment, the concept of a universal god, and the existence of the soul after death. Zarathushtra taught that there was one being, Ahura Mazda “Wise Lord”. They also hold elements such as earth, water, and fire sacred. Fire is a central image in their symbolism representing the light of Ahura Mazda and is held sacred. A careful reading of online resources will offer the visitor individualized presentations of a variety of doctrinal issues, translations of sacred text, and descriptions of observances.

Zoroastrians exhibit a vibrant passion for their beliefs and an adaptability that has carried them from Persia²⁴ to India and around the globe as a strong and confident diaspora community surviving over 3,000 years as a distinct ethno-religious group. Their communities range in size from as small as 4 - 70 individuals in such places as Venezuela, Japan, Sri Lanka, and South Africa to as large as 1,200 - 157,000 in places as diverse as Iran, India, the USA, UK, Canada . Many individuals online and Zoroastrian publications state that a fundamental distinction between Zoroastrianism and “Abrahamic” religions such as Judaism and Christianity is its reflective rather than prescriptive quality. While there is a set list of commandments and rules within other monotheistic religions, Zarathushtra gives no list of specific rules or commandments.

The 'Good Religion' is a religion of choice, not a mandatory obligation forced on us by a supreme and fearful entity...reflective rather than prescriptive as many other religions are. Each person can by his or her own mind, personal preferences and free will select what he or she wants to believe in for conducting his or her life.

(California Zoroastrian Center.org)²⁵

This was a point made several times to me in discussions on the Ushta list. As one member put it, "There's no list where you can check whether you did something good when doing X." (Ushta, 2009). This was directly linked by individuals to Zoroastrianism's distinctness from Judeo-Christian doctrine and practice with its emphasis on guilt and sin. Without a list, one is exhorted in the Gāthās then to follow one's own mind in pursuit of "Asha" which is variously described as 'truth' and 'righteousness' but has further nuances that do not translate directly. Humanity is exhorted to seek after wisdom and understanding and apply it toward good to assist Ahura Mazda in removing evil from creation.

Zoroastrianism has been variously described as the "world's oldest revealed religion" (unescoparzor.com), a "universal religion" (Zoroastrianism.com), "'mother" faith of all mankind"²⁶ (Havewala), the "good religion" (californiazoroastriancenter.org), and "one of the world's forgotten religions"²⁷ (fravahr.org) Websites, social networks, and Yahoo! groups identify Zoroastrianism, at the most fundamental level, as the teachings of Zoroaster (Greek) or Zarathushtra or Zardosht or Zartosht (Persian), and Zarthosht (Gujarati). The Traditional World of Zoroastrianism²⁸ site further defines Zoroastrians as Mazdayasni/Mazdayasni Zarathushtri:

All Zarathustris belong to the Mazdayasnan community... because our ancestors were Mazdayasnans and those pious Kings of the Peshdadian Dynasty...were all belong to a Mazdayasnan sect... They were not really Kings but "Saosyants" (benefactors of mankind) to reveal Mazdayasni religion among the Iranians. prior to the advent of Prophet Asho Zarathustra Spitama's visit to this world with HIS Message, there were two kinds of groups: Mazdayasni and Devayasni. Devayasni's were primarily idol worshippers who believed in plurality of gods... we are also known as Mazdayasni Zarathustris and belong to Ahurian Zarathustrian religion revealed to us by our Prophet Asho Zarathustra Spitama. It is, at times, also known as "datem Zarathustri" meaning "the Zarathustrian Law", because Asho Zarathustra has given in His religion several laws regarding sanitation and hygiene, and the laws of material and spiritual life. Mazdayasni religion exists since the inception of this world...

(Ervad (Dr.) Hoshang J. Bhadha, 1-13-2009)²⁹

From an ervad, or teacher priest, these words online to visiting Zoroastrians carry the weight of divine authority from one who is entrusted with guiding the community. His words define a Zoroastrian as an inheritor of an ancient history whose ancestors were philosopher kings who

revealed a religion that existed since the beginning of time. Zoroaster is one in a line of prophets who brought his unique message to counter 'the other' who worshipped multiple gods and idols.

Zarathushtra was born of the Spitaman family in what is generally accepted as the 2nd millennium B.C. (Boyce 2004, Mistree 1982). A Behdin – or lay follower of Zarathustra – seeks to honor all men and women equally and to continually seek spiritual wholeness through purity of thought, word, and deed (California Zoroastrian Center).

Zoroastrians revere Zarathushtra for the clarity and progressiveness of his vision for the time:

For the first time in human history, man was shown a new path – a path leading towards the recognition of the mind, and thereby a better understanding of one's self.

(Mistree 1982:pg12)

For the first time in history, a universal religion was born with It promotes the human mind and provokes its thinking faculty.

(Jafarey, 2008)³⁰

The quotes above were deliberately chosen for their similarity despite being drawn from both a liberal-restorationist and a traditional perspective to emphasize the common root of Zoroastrian belief and respect for the religion's founder. The core of Zoroastrianism's unique message is seen as Zarathushtra's emphasis on independent thinking, "... the basic fulcrum of Z philosophy being Vair-yo; meaning intelligent, reasoned choice...: (Yahoo! Groups, 2008)

His essential message and the guiding doctrine of all Zoroastrians is Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds as derived from the Gāthās, the divine hymns declared by Zarathushtra:

*Every thing that is created was first a Thought.
So let your Thoughts be Good
Good Thoughts are those that are in harmony with the Wisdom in Creation
Let your Good Thoughts be known through Good Words
For that's when Creation first comes into being*

ZARATHUSHTRA - GATHA - YASNA HA. 28.11 (FR) (Fariborz Rahnmoon, 2006)³¹

The following examples of online narrative are representative snapshots of Zoroastrian passion and pride and offer glimpses into further details of historical Zoroastrian belief and identity.

Zoroastrianism is the religion in which God is viewed as Lord of Wisdom, Humans are given Choice and Free Will and are enjoined through the exercise of Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds to help Good triumph over Evil.

(Atlantazarathushtiassociation.org 1-4-09)

Drawn from a Zoroastrian organization site in the United States, they encapsulate in their message to visitor and member alike that Zoroastrians are given free will by God whose defining attribute is wisdom. They are enlisted in the conflict between good and evil to help good triumph and so have an active part in God's creation. Historical Zoroastrianism has at times been called a dualistic religion. Zoroastrians make a distinction between ethical dualism that defines 'good' and 'evil' as states of mind that was later seen to become a cosmic dualism that incorporated the material world. This created a battle between good and evil that humanity could actively influence. It also gave rise to complex purity laws to assist and move forward this work. One site, Fravahar, describes the opposing forces of good and evil as inclinations of the mind. Unlike one contemporary stream of Zoroastrian thought, it speaks of a the soul as an entity that chooses and states a belief in Frasho-kereti where good will triumph over evil which will be isolated and removed from creation. Frasho-kereti is a concept that is touched on rarely online with the following example one of the few I saw mentioned. It does form a strong part of traditional Zoroastrian belief offline (Boyce 2004, Choksy 2002, Rivetna 2002).

*In nature, there exist two opposing forces: **Spenta-Mainyu** the good mind or **assar-i roshni** and **Angre-Mainyu** the wicked mind or **assar-i tariki**. A continuous conflict goes on in nature between these two. A person's soul is caught between the two and is pulled by each from side to side... which reminds one of the path of Asha **Humata** (Good Thoughts), **Hukhta** (Good Words), and **Hvarasta** (Good Deeds), or **Manashni**, **Gavashni**, and **Kunashni** by which the soul is able to make its own spiritual progress...Ahura-Mazda has given every soul a free will to choose...to obey divine universal natural laws or to disobey them...If these divine laws are obeyed through **Manashni**, **Gavashni**, and **Kunashni**, our soul will be able to attain union with Ahura-Mazda. This far-off event, towards which the whole of creation moves, is called **Frasho-kereti**.*

(faravahar.org, 2009)

The Zoroastrian heritage of a "Life enhancing not a world denying faith" creates a Religion of Action which provides the foundation of daily life among the Parsi Zoroastrians.

Unescoparzor.com (The UNESCO Parsi Zoroastrian Project)

The following are examples of the numerous sites where one can find the information presented above: parsionline.com, wapiz.com, Zoroastrianism Today, zoroastriankids.com, vision-divine.com, Zoroastrianism.com, Zoroastrianism.cc, Ontario zoroastrian community foundation ozcf.com, Zoroastrianism.org, californiazoroastriancenter.org, zoroastrian association of greater new York zagny.org, Zoroastrian association of Florida, zoroastrian association of southern florida zasf.org.

Prophet or Sage, Divine Vision or Enlightened Guidance

There are also a number of variations among online voices concerning the details of Zarathushtra's life and modern identities based on his writings. His birth place may be given as "somewhere near the Aral sea in ancient Iran" (Mistree 2008), "Every country bordering present day Iran from Azerbaijan to Afghanistan and up north into Siberia..." (Rahnamoon 2007), "foothills of South Ural, in Central Asia or in the Transcaucasia" (Russian Anjoman site)³². Likewise, his date of birth may be anywhere from 6000 BC. to 600 B.C. (Dinshaw 2007, Rahnamoon 2007).

The two most noticeable differences among sites are interpretive statements of the nature of Zarathushtra and Ahura Mazda. Zarathushtra is perceived variously as a "sage" (Rahnamoon 2007), "visionary messenger" (Dinshaw 2007), "reformer" (Jafarey 2006), "teacher" (Ushta), "priest" and "savior" (zav.org.au), "prophet" and "holy prophet" (vision-divine.com 09) (2002a, Avesta.org June 26, 1995, Hirjikaka 2008, Mistree 2008). The very antiquity of Zoroastrianism and its long history as an oral tradition contributes to this diversity of belief. The Gāthās are the words of Zarathushtra; they are vibrant hymns of devotion and exultant inspiration. As verse, they are filled with metaphor and so some contend open to interpretation. There are no other texts of his time that serve to further illumine Zarathushtra's intentions or resolve ambiguities in the text. Traditional interpretation attributes Zarathushtra's hymns to divine inspiration, his prophetic words divine mandate:

With due respect to all concerned who hailed our beloved Paighambar Saheb as just a philosopher or friend, in reality so great was His status, that He appeared

to be the inseparable entity of the great Trinity, viz. Ahura Mazda, His sons Atash Paadshah and Asho Zarathushtra.

(<http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/mithai33.html>)

Let us see how great our Spitam Zarathushtra was ! How glorious his stature as a Paygambar³³ was ! What a deep reverence he commanded !

(www.ahuramazda.com)

Some, however, perceive his poetic hymns in the Gāthās as the inspired words of a sage and poet. These divergent perceptions of Zarathushtra as prophet, reformer, or sage have a fundamental impact on the nature and vision of Ahura Mazda and all of the teachings that follow. With this in mind, it is understandable that Ahura Mazda has also been described variously as “god”, “creator”, “wisdom”, “force”. From this dichotomy of perspective on the nature of Zarathushtra and Ahura Mazda arise many of the disagreements between groups within the global community. At the heart of disagreements is legitimization; this is not to say at all that either belief is not genuine, but each side must draw on a logic that gives it’s stance legitimacy. As Choksy (2002) reminds us, as a prophet his words represent communion with divinity.

Historical context plays a key role in understanding why certain interpretations are seen as more legitimate. There has been much written in scholarly work on the status of Zarathushtra as prophet (Boyce 2004, Choksy 2003). Choksy (2003) outlines the importance impact of hagiography in shaping Zoroastrianism in its constant contact with other religions that based legitimacy on prophecy and prophets and discusses how historical context suggests that Zarathushtra followed more in the tradition of the devotional poet, a well accepted and known practice in the region. Zoroastrians online have referred me to and/or reference Yasna 30:1 and 35:2 to illustrate that Zarathushtra referred to himself as a prophet and priest. The later stories, traditions, and legends of Zarathushtra follow very classic motifs of charismatic visionaries: auspicious birth, repeated attempts on their lives, initial resistance to their message, and often death as a martyr. In constant contact with prophetic religions and a need to legitimize their founder and beliefs, Zoroastrians may have shifted Zarathushtra from divinely inspired man to one who received direct revelation from divinity (Choksy 2003). Thus, his words moved from

praise and philosophical inspiration to divine instruction. Regardless of the true nature of Zarathushtra's inspiration, as the Zoroastrian Association of Victoria reminds us,

Prophet, philosopher, priest, poet, politician, shaman, witch doctor, radical or reformer - many epithets have been attributed to Zarathushtra and his larger than life personality is as intriguing as it is elusive. The abyss of antiquity that separates him from us today perhaps makes him a foggy figure but has not dimmed his contributions to the enrichment of the human race as a whole.

(www.zav.org.au/pages/zar.htm#)

Demographics

Scholars and outside groups are always interested in defining trends and the strength of groups for various reasons. Zoroastrian community members rely upon their research and government census data to identify trends which they use as a barometer of the relative health of local and global Zoroastrian communities. I was constantly struck by an almost obsessive preoccupation with population figures and other demographic data. Whenever I examined sites, publications, or in initial conversations, their anxiety over declining population and status as a marginal population was evident in reference to declining numbers or oft quoted global population figures at or below 200,000. These numbers convey their concern over assimilation and are also often linked with discussion of conversion and immigration of youth from core centers in Iran and India. To date there these are generally from middle aged and older individuals. Youth express concern but the general sense seems to be that this is either second to the issue of choosing where along the continuum of liberal to conservative they will choose to fall or that the two are entwined as one issue.³⁴ This is even more strongly conveyed by the numerous news articles and reports that quoted declining population figures as the first defining characteristic of Zoroastrian identity and community (Goodstein 2006a, Goodstein 2006b, Niebuhr 2001, Seshadri 2004). As Jamshed Guzdar, chairman of the Parsi Panchayat related in an interview "We are an endangered species..." (Zubrzycki 1998:pg.1)

Traditional/historical members often used these numbers as evidence of a need for revitalization and pride in the achievements of a small but dynamic community feeling that, "Unfortunately, because of our few numbers; North America has seen a mushrooming of the

ridiculous elements goaded by every impulse other than fact.” (Yahoo! Groups, 2008). Strongly orthodox Parsis see declining population thus also as a threat to the true Zoroastrian religion. Some more liberal voices use these numbers to strengthen arguments for conversion and intermarriage citing declining population as evidence that Zoroastrianism is in danger of dying without an infusion of converts. Numbers are also used to emphasize the steep decline of the community under the advent of Islam which spurred the first Zoroastrian Diaspora, and the tenacity and resilience of the first and second Diaspora in its faith and disproportionate strength of contribution to their adopted homelands. It is also used to encourage youth to become more committed to preserving their heritage.

There is a striking lack of reliable information on the global Diaspora population (Hinnells 2005). Varying numbers and lack of a firm, dependable global census excepting one in 2000 by FEZANA emphasizes the difficulties of the global community in establishing a firm core and global mechanism for gathering data on the Diaspora. In 1990, so critical was the need to collect accurate data that lacking an internal mechanism to do so, Rohinton Revitna, then president of FEZANA, urged membership to fill in religious affiliation on the government census rather than the all-purpose “Asian-Indian” category. This created concern among members who had relocated to North America from India who didn’t, “...want in any way to disassociate ourselves from India, and we do consider ourselves Indians first. But we did want a head count.” Despite these concerns, Revitna defended his policy underscoring the community’s difficulties in gaining an accurate count as, “We’ve tried several times and we keep coming up inaccurately.” (Sohrabji 1990:pg.2)

Table 7 is a snapshot of world Zoroastrian population data collected and referenced at Adherents.com³⁵ given over the decades that highlights the fluctuations and variances in population estimates. It cannot be stressed enough that these numbers are estimates not based on systematic census data gathering. Other sources give varying estimates of the global population between 100,000 and 275,000.

Table 5 Adherents by Source and Year

#Adherents	Year	Source
200,000	1975	Wallechinsky, David and Irving Wallace; The People's Almanac; Garden City, NY: Doubleday (1975) pg. 1263
130,000	1976	Eliade, Mircea & Ioan P. Couliano. The Eliade Guide to World Religions. Harper Collins: NY (1991) pg. 254
100,000	1981	Crim, Keith (ed) The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions. San Francisco: Harper Collins (1989)
271,000	1981	Popenoe, David. Sociology (5th ed.) Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc. (1983). (Source: 1981 Britannica Book of the Year) pg. 433
276,050	1982	Robertson, Ian. Sociology (2nd ed.); New York, NY: Worth Publishers (1981 2nd edition; updated since 1977 1st ed.). [Orig. source: Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year, 1982]; pg. 405.
100,000	1983	Oxtoby, Willard G. The Meaning of Other Faiths. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press (1983); pg. 39.
100,000	1999	*LINK* Jones, Jennifer. "Non-LDS students say they find BYU appealing " in "NewsNet@BYU " (online news, viewed 9 Feb. 1999); "This story was posted on Friday, February 5 1999 (c) NewsNet. "

(Adnerents.com)

As the state religion of the Persian Empires (549-330 B.C., 220-227B.C., 220-652 A.D.), Zoroastrians numbered in the millions. With the advent of Islam in 650 A.D., those numbers steeply declined. The immigration of the Parsis to India in 910-950 A.D. begins the Diaspora of the Zoroastrian community. The Parsi community established a strong presence and their population increased, a strong barometer measuring the success of the community in conjunction with the rise of Parsi family names nationally and some internationally recognized as leaders of industrial empires such as the Tatas, Wadias and Godrejs in shipping, banking, and industry. Today, that number is steadily dwindling. The UNESCO Parsi Zoroastrian Project site, using India's census data underscores the dwindling population of the Parsi community in the comparison of its peak of 114,000 in 1941 to 76,000 in 1991, a 33% fall in 50 years, further falling to 69,601 in 2001.³⁶ UNESCO Parzor states that the Parsi community "lose(s) 10% of their population every decennial census" (1-4-09). They have identified several causal factors: problems facing youth, issues of the aged, late marriages, non marriage, inter marriage, divorce, infertility, and migration.

The population of Zoroastrians in the homeland of Iran has constantly been under duress from Sharia law which punishes conversion from Islam with death and necessitates conversion to Islam if one marries a Muslim. Repeated persecution, killings, forced conversion, and discrimination encouraged all but the most devote to convert to Islam reducing a population of millions to only tens of thousands. At the turn of the 18th century they still numbered approximately one million until the ascension of the last Safavid king, Shah Sultan Hossein. Under the strong influence of the Islamic religious leaders, by French estimate 80,000 Zoroastrians were killed. The Zoroastrian population has come to occupy a unique place in modern Iran, "...generally understood to be deeply and completely Persian." Pg. 75 (Hemmasi 2002). Combined with the movement toward an Iranian nation and Persian nationalism, their numbers have slowly risen to 134,000 in the 1996 Iranian Government census and currently estimated at 157,000 (Rivetna 2002). There are still Zoroastrian villages, most notably in Yazd and Kerman, but many have gradually moved to urban centers which play a significant role in differences between the Irani and Parsi community to be detailed in the historical overview.

Changing population figures and shifts in demographics are used to illustrate the decline in these traditional strongholds of Zoroastrian community. This has created a constant awareness of the community as an "endangered species" (Sheida 2006). So ingrained is this sense of moving toward extinction that it has been a cord binding the orthodox and liberal for more than 100 years despite conflicts over fundamental issues such as the origin of the religion, scriptural authority, principal beliefs such as legitimacy of conversion, and ritual practices (Nigosian 1996). Another concern is the lack of socio-religious infrastructure available in communities outside of Iran and India as diaspora communities often number only in the tens or few hundreds. Fire Temples, Anjumans, Dharmasalas and other organizations and sources of refuge do not exist or are very few in places that youth are immigrating to outside of Iran and India. Immigrant religious communities are faced with the dilemma of introspection and reevaluation of practices as religious or cultural (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, Fenggang and Ebaugh 2001). In such an ethno-religious diaspora, the bond between religion and ethnicity is often broken as second and third generations begin to intermarry. The Zoroastrian community, perhaps more than others because

of such small numbers in their adopted lands, is faced with the challenge of developing socio-religious infrastructures and strong global community bonds.

Population counts are subject to several important factors. There is a wealth of research that reveals the impact of self identification and the imposition of census categories as well as the impact of 'symbolic ethnicity' (Waters 1990). Different population counts indicate this factor starkly and the implications for the community are important. A 2000 census was undertaken with the help of acknowledged Zoroastrian communities and shows the following population of Zoroastrians worldwide:

Table 6 Population Counts by Country

Iran	157,000	United Arab Emirates	1,200	Malaysia	30
India	76,382	New Zealand	250	Seychelles	30
USA	18,000	Hong Kong	190	Japan	20
Canada	7,000	Singapore	150	Bermuda	16
Europe	4,000	Sri Lanka	100	China	10
Pakistan	2,510	South Africa	70	Venezuela	4
Australia	2,100	Myanmar (Burma)	50		

(Rivetna 2002:pg.92)

Contrast this with data to be found on non-Zoroastrian sites such as Adherents which estimates the global Zoroastrian population at 2.6 million (2004) and World Christian Database which estimated it at 2,647,523 from the following countries:

Table 7 Alternate Population Counts by Country

Afghanistan	429,175	India	164,456	Seychelles	25
Australia	3,241	Iran	1,826,012	Sri Lanka	2,324
Bangladesh	351	Kazakhstan	7,682	Syria	37
Belgium	11	Kenya	795	Tajikistan	7,627
Britain	89,498	Kirgizstan	2,639	Tanzania	115
Canada	25,578	Myanmar	735	USA	56,827
China	587	Netherlands	57	Uzbekistan	3,361
France	60,711	Pakistan	25,784		

([source](#): (Database 2004))

This exemplifies more clearly than discussion the challenges the community faces if even half of these numbers are accurate indicating a rapid influx of individuals claiming membership that are not part of recognized communities. The answer to this rapid jump from approximately 200,000 to approximately 2.6 million lies in the search for identity and reclamation of heritage and voluntary conversion as much as it does in the uncertainty of estimation.

This trend seems only destined to increase with the access the Internet gives both to those searching for information on Zoroastrianism and the power it gives to voices seeking to spread the vision of Zarathushtra as a religion open to universal conversion. The actual Zoroastrian population then is difficult to determine. The power of self-selection of an identity is most clear in the collection of data by non-Zoroastrian organizations which use different criteria from Zoroastrian organizations and even within Zoroastrian groups criteria may vary. For non-Zoroastrian organizations it is left completely to self-selection. Historically however, membership was defined by both blood ties and belief. Similar to Judaism, children according to some orthodox that are born to a Zoroastrian parent are Zoroastrian by birth. Though, unlike Judaism's matrilineal ties, Zoroastrianism is patrilineal. Thus, children of Zoroastrian fathers are accepted as true Zoroastrians whereas those born to a mother who has married outside of the group are not, an especially strong ideological stance in the Parsi community in India. It is interesting to note that the FEZANA 2005 census defined membership as "anyone following the faith" and so removed the ethno-religious qualification though the census was delivered only to those already counted within its membership introducing a limited level of self-selection. With other segments of Zoroastrian membership insisting that children born of either parent who has married outside be accepted, one quickly sees how figures depend on who is collecting them.

Today's emerging trend to remove ethnicity as criteria for membership has created a new friction among those who claim membership in the Zoroastrian community. For purposes of analysis adherents to Zoroastrianism then can be seen as following four different streams of thought: historical/traditional, liberal traditionalists, reformist/restorationist and a restorationist segment that is monist. Also it is important to bear in mind that there are also ultra liberal and

ultra orthodox and as such insist on extreme compromise or none at all. Dr. Dolly Dastoor, a leading member in the North American community asks,

...whether the contemporary community is prepared to redefine the parameters of its existing group structure, which has been available for over a 1,000 years to only those who are born into the religion, towards acceptance of others? Will the redefining be based on public opinion, or court battles or is the community prepared to organize structures to facilitate the process of acceptance?

(Rivetna 2002:pg92)

She also points out that with such small, widely dispersed enclaves assimilation is also a danger. Can then Zoroastrians balance acceptance without assimilation? This is the story underlying the issue of accurate demographics. It underscores the importance of understanding how the Internet is and will play a role in influencing community opinion and assist in organizing the “structures to facilitate the process of acceptance”. The Internet is also a window into how that balance of acceptance may not be acceptable to some community segments and will fracture the cohesiveness of the global Diaspora. The strong current in contemporary Zoroastrianism for universal conversion, unlike any movement thus far in Zoroastrian identity, presents the greatest challenge the community has faced. Combined with the exposure made possible by the Internet, there is also, for the first time, a break in the global community and it is creating segments that will, some are suggesting, have to agree to disagree.

The global community in general is well educated as, “To educate their children is a spiritual duty of Zoroastrian parents.” (Modi 1893) pg. 389. This generally high level of education ensures a wide comfort with technology Individuals on the Yahoo! lists have stated that the Zoroastrian community is one of the most highly educated groups in the world. The literacy rate for the Parsi community is 97.9%, the highest in India, and is emphasized for both men and women (2002a). The FEZANA survey for North America again underscores the pervasiveness of education: 40% having a bachelor’s degree, 28% a Masters degree, and 11% having a doctorate degree or medical doctors. This has created a community that is both very active in scholarly discussions of the religion as well as a community with the inclination, resources, and interest in utilizing the web

to do so. More detailed demographics can be found on the UNESCO Parsi and FEZANA websites³⁷

Ethnic cohesion has been maintained in many communities through concentrating in a small settlement whereby individuals can reinforce cultural values. In a community where ritual for many is an integral part of identity requiring a supporting social structure and where preservation of cultural and religious heritage is of primary concern, the percentage of those ranking living around other Zoroastrians as of first or second importance was remarkably weak in North America.³⁸ I would suggest that this may be in part because technology, the Internet being an important component, allows Zoroastrians to stay in touch and the Western Diaspora appears to shift toward a more liberal perspective that reduces somewhat the role of numerous rituals in daily living that require priesthood and community involvement.

Is a Rose by any other name a Rose? Self-Selection is Self-Reference

Here in America the question of my identity is not as clear cut as it was in the little Parsi world I came from. My loyalties are being pulled between calling myself a Parsi...a Zarathushti or a Zoroastrian... I also throw my nationality into the pot – of India, the country of my birth, North America, my country of adoption, and sometimes also Iran, where my forefathers came from, the motherland of my religion. I really think of myself as a Parsi-Indian-Iranian-North-American-Zarathushti.

(Rivetna, editorial, FEZANA Spring 1999)

Self-selection also arises in the complex weaving of identities in a diaspora, and in the Zoroastrian community it is driven strongly by the additional current of revitalization. Before moving on to further discussion of Zoroastrian identity online and to better appreciate the complexities of their discussions, it is helpful to examine briefly a variety of terms used by the community to designate a Zoroastrian. A Zoroastrian is faced with more than just the internal question of identity as ethnicity and/or religious belief. They also negotiate both an inner landscape where they sculpt the contours of identity against nationalism and modern pressures to 'simplify' practices and/or to 'fit in'. As Rivetna above explains, one's identity is also defined by the nationality of one's birth country and one's adopted country as well as 'homeland'.

'Zoroastrian' as a label of identity is itself being quietly replaced in the transformation of community and individual identity. It is a westernized and scholarly identity that is a prism for how the outside world interpreted Zoroastrians derived from the Greek's name of 'Zoroaster' for the prophet. A crisis of identity is encapsulated in the sheer number of terms replacing 'Zoroastrian' as a self-reference term. In seeking to re-energize a shrinking community and preserve a vanishing culture and heritage, alternatives are being used in preference to the Westernized and scholarly identity. A variety of self-reference terms are used in narratives online and publications highlighting foundational aspects of identity such as ethnicity, nationalism, and cultural heritage. It also serves as a return to Persian roots, in a sense reversing Westernization of their culture and religion. Many are reaching back to an ancient heritage and returning to terms such as Mazdayasna/Mazdayasni "worshippers of Ahura Mazda" as well as Zardoshti/Zarathoshti "followers of Zarathushtra". It is telling that FEZANA's Spring 1999 journal is dedicated solely to the issues of Zoroastrian identity, and that in 2009 there is still a wide variety of terms being used among the global communities. In the Spring 1999 issue in a reprint of an earlier proposal, Jamshed R. Udvadia asks "what's in a name?" and concludes that it is an issue of respect for Zarathushtra as a prophet and an individual, an issue of respect for the religion and its followers and pride in one's *identity*. Mr. Udvadia concludes that Zarathushtra, Zarathushti Din and Zarathushti are the most accurate terms and recommended that FEZANA set the example in the community and adopt them forthwith³⁹. In this same 1999 issue Mrs. Rivetna summarizes the dilemma that existed then and is still evident online: "To date, we cannot even agree on our name. Should we call ourselves 'Zoroastrian' or 'Zarathushti' or one of the multitudes of spelling variations in between?" (FEZANA, Spring 1999: pg. 3).

Names embody history and symbolism that hold the essence of how we see ourselves and how we would define ourselves to others. Zoroastrian is derived from the Greek translation of Zarathushtra as "Zoroaster". The most widely used replacement for Zoroastrian, *Zarathushti*, is derived instead from the Persian Zarathushtra. Shifts in usage can be seen in publications by FEZANA as already mentioned. Variations such as Zarathushti and Zarathushtri are also used.

Zardoshti/Zartoshti highlights the Iranian heritage of the speaker and so invokes the history and culture of ancient Persia and pride as being from the homeland of the 'prophet', 'sage', or 'visionary' of the religion.

Parsi/Irani Zoroastrian is used by those who believe that identity as religion and ethnicity is inseparable. Some so strongly that it would be better, "...we lose 50 or 100 people than our entire culture," (Sohrabji 1988) through intermarriage or conversion. It is important to note that, "Many younger members of the international communities no longer wish to be known by what they see as purely ethnic markers, namely Parsis and Iranians, but simply as Zoroastrians." (Hinnells 2005) *Irani* refers to those Zoroastrians who are from Iran or have only recently emigrated from Iran. The belief that the oppression of Islam on the Zoroastrian community since 750 A.D. has resulted in a difference between *Parsi* and *Irani* personality has been expressed to me personally and online. This difference in history and experience, nationality, and personality has implications for nuances in identity that are thus expressed by and necessitate attaching *Irani* or *Parsi* to Zoroastrian.

The term '*Parsi*' is a way of telling the listener, in one word, the full identity of a Zoroastrian from India. Derived from the Gujarati for "Persian", it has become the term of reference for those Zoroastrians that left Iran in the 10th century A.D. to settle in India. Parsis are very proud of their contribution to the wealth and success of India despite their small numbers, and are grateful to what they see as their homeland for offering their nascent diaspora community refuge from Arab persecution. This emotional connection to history, nation, and religion is the heart and soul of the word *Parsi* and the identity it both reminds its user of and conveys to the listener. As a member of the Diaspora to North America, one *Parsi* recognizes that loss of identity with the loss of the use of the appellation on merging with the larger community as represented by adopting the general term *Zarathushti*, "While my mind tells me...I must separate my ethnicity from my religion, my heart is very sad about the thought of giving up the *Parsi* appellation." (Rivetna 1999:pg.3) She illustrates in this introspection the additional currents that pull on an individual from revitalization efforts against the threat of extinction.

Ethnicity and religion thus are at the core of identity for most Parsis as the thoughts expressed in Rivetna's words reveal. To change one's term of identity from Parsi to Zarathushti implies a decoupling for some of ethnicity and religion and a shifting of the layers of nationalism so that it is not entwined with religion and ethnicity as who one is. This has been a controversial issue for the community. Within India it has come to be used for the Zoroastrians as an ethnic minority. Within the Diaspora it has necessitated for some a careful defining of the term so that it can be separated from 'Zoroastrian' or 'Zarathushti'. The North American Council of Mobeds (NACM) adopted a resolution at its 13th Annual General meeting in 2000 to define a "Zoroastrian" as well as distinguish between a "Parsi" and a "Zoroastrian":

- *Parsi is a race.*
- *Zoroastrianism is a religion.*
- *The term "Parsi" applies to the descendents of the original migrants who left Iran to settle in India to preserve the Zoroastrian religion.*
- *A "Parsi" is a person born of both Parsi parents who has an inalienable right to practice the Zoroastrian religion.*
- *A "Zoroastrian" is a person who believes and follows the teaching of Zoroaster.*
- *It is recognized that "Zoroastrianism" is a universal religion.*
- *It is further recognized that a Zoroastrian is not necessarily a Parsi.*

(<http://www.namcweg.org/home.htm>)

It should be noted here that a Parsi as a 'person born of both Parsi parents' differs from the legal definition established in Indian courts that define "Parsi" as an individual born of a Zoroastrian father. This is a position followed by many with the exception of the ultra orthodox groups. I would estimate that on approximately 70% of sites and comments by traditional Zoroastrians that I encountered the definition of the courts was seen to be a threat to the continuance of the religion. It would suggest that those who take the time to focus on the community on sites exhibit a degree of activism that one might associate with social movements. This is one of the indicators that lead me to conclude that the Internet is a place for polarization and that perhaps, in terms of representativeness, what is observed online are largely the passionate ends of the spectrum.

Neo-Zoroastrian heralds a new chapter in the Diaspora and a transformation rather than evolution of Zoroastrian identity. The climate in these communities of conflicting acceptance of these individuals succinctly outlined in 1999 in the FEZANA journal is as apt today as perceived from online discussions and sites as it was then: "Amidst vitriolic protests from the right, acclamation from the left and silence from the majority in between..." pg. 57. Neo-Zoroastrian/Zarathushti identities began emerging in the 1980's and 1990's (Rivetna 2000, Bekhradnia 2004, Bekhradnia 1994). They are seen as those not born into the religion and fall into three general groups:

1. Those, especially in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, who with the fall of the Soviet Republic are asserting national identities that are seen as synonymous with their ancient pre-Islamic religious identity that was taken in forcible conversion to Islam
2. Iranians who were forcibly converted to Islam who wish to return to their pre-Islamic religious identity
3. A growing number of people who are *learning through the Internet* and other media of the ethical doctrines of Zarathushtra.

They are also known as 'by choice' or 'reverted' or 'converted' Zarathushtis (FEZANA 1999)

A "Zoroastrian" Defined

In setting aside for a moment the complexities of identity just discussed, how is the community defining 'Zoroastrian' at the most basic level? At the heart of the discussion of definitions is again the issue of ethnicity. Rivetna (1999) alludes to the efforts of organizations across the world who find themselves trying to incorporate definitions of a Zoroastrian into guidelines for association membership. I will argue later in discussing the history of Zoroastrian Internet usage that this has its roots in the mid to late 1980's with the use of the Internet. This expansion of awareness of the Zoroastrian community in the mind of the general public through greater exposure and revitalization efforts merged with the effects of the establishment and growth of a conversion oriented organization known as The Zarathushtrian Assembly co-founded in 1991 by Ali Jafarey who has become a controversial member of the community.

The NACM's 2000 resolution had its roots in earlier discussions and friction between the new council and some of the orthodox segment of the community. In a series of letters in 1997 and 1998 between the then President of the NACM Ervad Jal N. Birdy and Ervad (Dr.) Hoshang J. Bhadha posted on the World of Traditional Zoroastrianism⁴⁰ we see one definition and the arguments against it. The NACM, in response to strong criticism, moved to define a Zoroastrian as, "...a person born of both Zoroastrian parents, who has undergone a traditional Navjote ceremony performed by an ordained Mobed and believes and practices the faith revealed by Asho Zarathushtra."(Ervad Birdy, original letter 3-23-97)⁴¹ This definition however, does not define the parameters of parentage clearly allowing for circumstances of intermarriage where the intermarrying spouse may have a navjote performed and so for some members of the community allowing them the designation of Zoroastrian.

Careful attention to the definitions proposed by organizations and objections and counter definitions reveal three criteria defining a Zoroastrian: 1) being descendant from Zoroastrian parent(s), 2) initiated into the faith by a Navjote ceremony, and 3) being one who "attests to be a true believer and follower of the religion as propounded by Asho Zarathustra". This third criteria is a westernized one, but is not accepted by most Zoroastrians in Iran, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka⁴². FEZANA's Spring 1999 issue offers a compilation of the appropriate sections of constitutions and bylaws of associations. The author, Nina DiLucci notes that of 24 one had no formulation, 14 were undefined, and nine had varying formulations (pg.64-66). Within these eight are the three designated criteria for Zoroastrian membership. Only one, the Traditional Mazdayasni Zoroastrian Anjuman of California, restricts membership to those who have not 'married outside the Zoroastrian fold'. Even with these three criteria we must finally define two ideal definitions of a 'true' Zoroastrian. Within a liberal ideal, 1) a Zoroastrian asserts publicly their intentions to be a member in the performance of the Navjote which is further legitimized by a member of the priesthood, 2) they voluntarily claim membership as a true believer and follower of Zarathushtra and follow "customary practices", 3) are born of at least one Zoroastrian parent. Within the orthodox ideal, a true Zoroastrian must meet both the first and second criteria. Additionally, within the second criteria, 'customary practices' will include all traditional ritual and

observances as outlined in the Gāthās and the full Avesta and within criteria three – most importantly- a Zoroastrian is born as one from *parents who are both ethnically Persian*. A moderate compromise has been made in allowing children of Zoroastrian fathers to claim membership and so be allowed within the Fire Temples and access to appropriate purification rituals and prayers at death. I will argue that *there has now emerged a third ideal of membership*, contemporary Zoroastrianism now includes that *membership is open to all who profess belief and have the Navjote performed regardless of parentage*.

Traditions, Cosmology, and Doctrine

Nothing illustrates better the profound cosmological differences among the different groups in the community and their definitions of Zoroastrianism than their positions toward the meaning and practice of religious doctrine and related ritual and traditions. It is not the intent in the following to give an exhaustive presentation of Zoroastrian belief and ritual which is far beyond the scope of this paper. A general sense of the extensive traditional practices and cosmology provides a frame of reference for further discussions. Also, to understand the shift of Zoroastrian thought and definitions of identity beginning in the 1800's through the schism being created by contemporary thought supporting a universal religion of conversion, it is important to understand the breadth of historical Zoroastrianism's cosmology and observances of tradition and ritual. Religion is a bond and group boundary marker. It provides them with 'an identity of purpose' (Mistree 1982). It is a system comprised of ritual and tradition that is utilized to "express, codify and reaffirm the central values of a group of people...so as to maintain the devotional as well as ethical fabric of that society."(Mistree 1982) pg. xiii. Ritual and tradition are fundamentally linked in meaning in shared symbolism and the importance of cultural values and social doctrine which in turn is embedded within history for explanation and at times new meanings.

Meaning comes to be endowed...by relating experiences to culturally specific and societally significant issues, then preserving and transmitting the results across regions and eras to ensure that human actions are shaped or reshaped...Even if merely part of a mythology, a society's doctrines, theologies, rituals, stories, and artifacts are linked to attempts at creating structure, order, and significance so that people can better understand and function within space and time."

History thus supplies a guide and yardstick for the future: "...the ideas generated and applied by faith to human actions also...connect a poorly known, mythic past through a progressive series of events to each person's present within a socioreligious scheme of communal history and historiography." (Choksy 2002: pg. 7). As such, tradition is used to define their place in the world, world events, and to give reason and at times justification for their actions and that of those around them. For traditional Zoroastrianism, their religion is the core of their identity and is entwined with history and ethnic heritage as a process of individual choice whose purpose is to enable the soul to return to Ahura Mazda:

Religion is a way of life Divinely designed by Ahura-Mazda to allow a particular Soul go through a spiritual process to release Drujis (evil, impurities) attached with it, so that, one day that Soul can return back to HIM... Thus, our birth as Zarathustri is a divine blessing. ...

(Ervad (Dr.) Hoshang J. Bhadha, 1-13-2009)⁴³

In this very traditional approach, religious practice is a process to refine the soul and reunite it with Ahura Mazda; within this frame, one can better understand why ritual and tradition must be exactly maintained. Many times over the course of conversations online it was conveyed to me that the very sound of the prayers in the ancient tongue held power to combat evil just by virtue of being spoken. To change words, to remove ritual then is to compromise the process of the soul's refinement and ultimate salvation. Some suggest that there is as well an inherent connection at some level to race and a sympathetic connection between the resonance of energy in century's old prayer and tradition. The prayers in the original language are imbued with power that is activated in their recitation in the original tongue (Mistree 1982); "...the entire language itself, and its pronunciation...has a powerful mystical effect in the fight against evil." (Havewala).⁴⁴ One can thus better appreciate the strength of resistance of traditional groups to that of other persuasions within the global community that would remove certain prayers and ritual and promote open conversion.

The understanding of any religion begins in knowledge of sacred text which supplies the blueprint of the self ascribed community. All Zoroastrians accept the Gāthās as the original words

of Zarathushtra be they divinely inspired or the philosophical enlightenments of a great sage. These hymns are believed to have been transmitted orally; they comprise what is known as the Younger Avesta. The Gāthās are comprised of five hymns of poetic meter.⁴⁵ The full corpus of scripture is known as the Avesta. The Zand is a compilation of the explanations and commentaries of the Avesta first written in Pahlavi which developed as one of the Middle Iranian languages from Old Persian during the Sasanian Empire (224-651 CE.). Only a small portion of the Avesta exists today. It contains the ceremonial liturgies, invocations, purity laws, and supplementary prayers as well as history, medicine, architecture and other learning. It is also divided into five sections each devoted to specific areas. Traditional schools of thought rely on the extant Avesta which includes the Gāthās as the full collection of sacred text and ritual. The stance of a reform/restorationist Zoroastrian is that only the Gāthās are the most historically accurate as the balance of the scriptures are accretions of philosophy and rules that have been made by later individuals and so they do not have the weight of inspired legitimacy.

Doctrine

Zoroastrian doctrine appears relatively simple on the surface. Individuals are exhorted to seek 'Asha' translated as 'Order' or 'Truth' by good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. Yet Asha is also defined as righteousness. A long thread of discussion often on Ushta indicated just how difficult this term is to translate into English as it covers several nuances of meaning in being applied to the material and spiritual world. Other streams of discussion and commentary also often surfaced on a variety of other terms such as haurvata and sraosha (or seraosha) - the theological nuances often subtle. Mistree (1982) labels it 'Zoroastrian Metaphysics' and reveals a complex philosophy that I watched debated repeatedly.

It solves the complicated problem of good and evil by placing them in the human mind as two opposing "mentalities," not entities. Good serves and promotes human society in an ecologically sound world, while evil damages and retards society's good progress. A human being, endowed with a discriminating mind, is born free to choose between good and evil. This places a heavy responsibility on an individual choice. As Choksy (2002) succinctly describes it, it was built on the recognition of 'constant tension between the forces of order and chaos (pg. 15). Rituals that were

correctly performed allowed individuals and the Amesha Spentas to bind themselves to Asha and establish order to the universe.

Observances

Ritual, holidays, and festivals are familial and communal events that strengthen bonds, obligations, responsibilities, and goodwill among members. The traditional Zoroastrian community observes a wealth of such events. These ceremonies include those for purification, initiation, marriage, funerary, consecration, inner liturgical observances, thanks giving and celebratory observances, and those for maintaining and strengthening the Holy Fire within a fire temple. There is a distinct difference between offline, scholarly presentations and online descriptions of community observances, ritual, and practice. The former provide a historically contextualized, organized fabric of religious life that is presented as an interwoven ideology. Online sources often provide highlights of practice such as festivals but do not delve deeply into the more complex prayers and practices such as those involving the deceased. The presentations may be request driven such as on discussion groups, and often reflect individualistic choices and emphasis. Several authors have provided clear and detailed studies of Zoroastrian practices (Boyce 2004, Choksy 2002, Mistree 1982). Following is a brief summary of Zoroastrian observances and practice as drawn from various online sources so that, as in the historical narrative to follow, the discovery of the richness of the Zoroastrian tradition and nuances of online variation can be recreated for the reader.

There are six festivals throughout the year- Nou Rouz (the Persian New Year) on March 21, Zarathushtra's Birthday (Khordad Saal) on March 26, Jashne Tirgan July 1, Jashne Mehrgan October 2, Zarathushtra's Death Anniversary December 26, and Jashne Sadeh January 30. There are also monthly festivals that many still follow. These occur when the name of the day and the name of the month are the same. Most last one day, though Jashne Dey Gan is December 23rd, 30th, and January 7th and Panjeh is from March 16th-20th. In addition to these there are the six seasonal holidays, or Ghambars: Maidyoizaremaya (Mid-Spring), Maidyoshema (Mid-Summer), Paitishahya (Early Autumn-bringing in the corn), Ayathrima (Mid-Autumn- bringing in of

the herds), Maidhyairya (Mid-winter), and Hamaspathmaedaya (Pre-Spring 6th festival). (ahura.homestead.com, parsionline.com)

Nowrooz/Norooz/Norouz⁴⁶, or the Persian New Year, occurs at the Vernal Equinox in March and is a festival observed across all segments of the Zoroastrian community. It is invested with a wealth of symbolism. The Internet is filled with discussions of the meaning and symbolism of Nowrooz and illustrates its importance in building ties of community. Ritual holidays and observances also offer a chance for people to share personal belief and experience and reach across boundaries to explain world views. At this very moment it is abundantly clear as I see messages across the email lists wishing members “Navroze Mubarak”, or a happy Nowrooz, videos about the sofreh table of Nowrooz on YouTube, and happy wishes for Nowrooz on Z-book.

A member of two lists that I participate in, Mobedyar Mehran, shared he and his family's personal practice of the sofreh table that is set to celebrate Nowrooz and which encapsulates its meanings. With his kind permission, I will share his description and images which he posted to one list in response to a conversation another member and myself were involved in. He posted:

The attached file consisted of photos of Pnajej ceremony, in my own family in Kerman. The moobedyAr with white cloths is me (Figure 3). The table is called haft sin by other Iranians and is called the Sofreh-ye jashn in Zoroastrian ceremony.

(Mobedyar Mehran Ghebi)



Figure 5 Mobedyar Mehran Gheibi,
mehran_gheibi@yahoo.com

The seven article in our table cloth is not seven things with names starting with "S".



Figure 6 Sofreh-ye jashn Table for Nowrooz,

There are 7 symbols, showing the 7 adjectives that a human being should improve inside him/her to reach best life. 1- Egg and milk = bahman= good mind. 2- fire= ardibehesht= the best law/ the law of universe 3- metal, especially silver coin,=shahrivar= the desirable kingdom (to be king rulling over ourself) 4- natural flat rock= esfand= the serenity that is the result of knowledge (science), love and faith 5- pure water= khordAd= perfectness, wholeness, completeness 6- green plant and foods made of plants= amordAd= immortality and the final aim of human being = 7- mirror= spenta minoo or ahhorA mazdA= improving mind or creative mind (God).

The seven symbols have various explanations. As he points out, his is not created with seven things whose names start with 's', though this is one explanation given by many others for the items on the sofreh table. Another respondent replied to my interest by explaining the meaning and symbolism of the sofreh table by linking it to the Amesha Spentas:

The Haft-Sin table most Persians set at NowRooz is a left over of the Meyazd, even though much corrupted in time. A token of each of the seven Ameshasepands should be placed on the Sofreh representing 1- Fire (a candle, burning incense) 2- Water (water or vine) 3- Earth (the earth in a potted plant, usually the Sonbol or Hyacinth) 4- Air (incense, polished metal utensils, a gold coin)... 5- Plants (any plant specially Sabzeh or greens that one grows for NowRooz) 6- Animals (Colored Eggs, milk, a goldfish) 7- and Man (A mirror, a book, a watch, a pen or any tool that shows the intelligence of its user.).

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

As can be readily seen, each item is designed to symbolize an ideal, a reminder of some aspect that we are to strive to emulate. As is evident from Figure 5 below, this is a celebration that brings family and friends together in contemplation, prayer, and celebration for the coming year.



Figure 7 Mobedyar Gheibi, family and friends celebrating Nowrooz

Development of Streams of Zoroastrian Thought

This was one of the most difficult and rewarding segments of this study. This discussion is focused on delineating the categories of Zoroastrian ideology and thus identity that were being shared online. Without a strong face-to-face component, finer nuances within the community will need to be gleaned from further interaction as well as scholarly studies. I was able to interact with the online community and ask questions about the nature of Ahura Mazda as God, Zarathushtra as a prophet, conversion, and what the true nature and core tenets of Zoroastrianism truly were as they saw them. This brought to the forefront several significant concerns and forced me several times to carefully evaluate how I would define the Zoroastrian community. One of the critical issues of debate is scriptural authority; stemming from discussions on this are sometimes vitriolic disagreements and accusations of turning Zoroastrians into a 'people of the Kitaab' or 'people of the book' which has deeply offensive overtones for those who reach back into history and recall that the advent of Islam required that those religions that were 'tolerated' must be 'people of the book'. Thus, those that allow the Gāthās only as sacred text are seen as trying to Islamicise Zoroastrianism. This ultimately leads to history and scriptural authority being quoted to justify differing perspectives on ritual and conversion.

The global Zoroastrian community is a complex tapestry of ancient tradition and modern transformations with tangled roots in historical movements, and it lives in the personalities of several charismatic individuals. From an etic perspective individual threads are difficult to trace. At times, the threads merge on a particular point then diverge on another. An in depth discussion of these is outside the scope of this paper, and to do the Zoroastrian community justice the author will not attempt to do so beyond a general description of the viewpoints. These schools of thought are expressions of identity as each puts forward their interpretations as authentic; some are willing to accept variations and some only acknowledging theirs as that of a 'true' Zoroastrian identity.

The Internet has given these different streams of thought a louder voice and greater visibility to the general public. I posted to the MainstreamZoroastrians alias asking if the Internet is bringing the community closer, allowing more effective communication among members, and if it

was changing the community. One respondent stated, “The Internet brought forth differences that were earlier glossed over.” (NP, Yahoo! Groups, 10-5-08). Some traditional Zoroastrians feel that too much attention is paid to those who would take the religion and change it to fit their own image and so are cautious in spending much time in elaborating on differences thereby refusing to lend legitimization of those views. Yet scholars focus on the esoteric developments of a religion, of a people, on the differences that may signal cultural changes. These differences signal change, and the ripples within the community that these discussions engender online are indicative of its struggle to manage the changes being thrust upon it within a global diaspora and rising public awareness. These ripples are suggestive of what the face of Zoroastrianism may look like in the future.

Here again one sees the value of the Internet and its limitations – information on the various schools of thought were gleaned from online discussions in three Yahoo! lists, in email discussions, and from websites. My thoughts and characterizations of the philosophies were posted for comment and clarifications. It has been gathered from individuals across the world which would not be feasible through traditional methods with such immediacy of interaction. These online discussions stir a passion to understand fully the wealth and fluidity of the worldviews presented, yet herein lies the limitation and the Internet's importance as a transmovement space. These often passionate exchanges encourage greater interaction within and at times between groups and allow for a flow of information; they also underscore and fuel conviction often *within* groups to meet face to face. For the researcher, it underscores the desire and need to meld virtual ethnography to traditional fieldwork, to put faces and voices to the names on the screen and watch the eyes, the body language of the person(s) speaking and see the passion, frustration, and joy as it works its way across their visages as they tell their story.

The varying streams of philosophical/religious thought – the convictions and perceptions that drive divergences and the labels that are loosely used to identify these different paradigms are important expressions of identity both on and offline. The labels of ‘traditional’, ‘orthodox’, ‘reformist’, ‘Gathaist’, ‘restorationist’, ‘liberal’, ‘Mazdayasani’ are used today by community members to establish boundaries to allow those within the same philosophical tradition a

community of affirmation both on and offline. The Internet allows a significant amount of interaction then for Zoroastrians who may follow a non-historical observance and who might otherwise feel isolated. Non-Zoroastrians find value in such labels to quantify the various philosophies and set them in compact divisions.

Traditional Zoroastrianism and Liberalizing Voices

It's not just how we bathe or how we cook or how we live that makes us Zoroastrians - it is how we think and speak and behave - the Spirit of Zoroastrianism is inborn and cannot be acquired!

(SM, personal communication 2009)

I refer to the orthodox portion of the community as 'traditional' or 'historical'. Both terms emphasize the strength of history and a continuity of practice. Some have argued that the 'traditionalists' are not truly so because they follow a tradition, that regardless of the centuries behind it, is a deviation from Zarathushtra's original and 'true' message to be found in the Gāthās only. As with all things, it is a matter of one's vantage point; I have elected to retain these designations to refer to the orthodox as both the academic literature and others also do so. There is also a 'liberal' movement within the community that argues for a relaxation of some hard line stances in the face of modern realism. It is these two stances that comprise the majority of the community.

Historical/traditional Zoroastrianism accepts the full texts of the Avesta as sacred canon, does not allow conversion, and intermarriage with non-Zoroastrian women. Extreme orthodox members abjure all forms of intermarriage. Their stance defines Zoroastrian identity as discussed earlier as an ethno-religious one as the statement by SM above so passionately affirms. Since the 1800's in India there has been a shift and a small segment of the community has argued for a more liberal perspective that allows conversion and intermarriage. The deep impact this has had for the Parsi community is eloquently stated online at Delhi Parsi created by the Delhi Parsi Anjuman⁴⁷

With respect to our diminishing numbers, our community is clearly divided between the orthodox hard-liners, and the progressive liberals.

One side we have those who would rather “uphold the purity of our bloodlines, than have any bloodline surviving at all”.

On the other hand, we have those who would “rather infuse fresh new blood, to uphold the tenets of Zoroastrianism and what Parsis stand for - for a long time to come.”...

And so, the debate will rage on...

We will continue to eject daughters and their children, if they choose to marry outside their community. And we will praise our sons who marry within, even if they don't wear a sudreh-kusti or do anything to nurture the community beyond procreating more offspring, who in turn become ambivalent towards the whole 'parsi thing'.

(Anjuman 2007)

Historical events play a significant role in the above division in the Parsi community and later we will see the Irani Zoroastrian community. One of the conditions for granting refuge to Zoroastrians in India was that they would not convert or intermarry⁴⁸. Combined with the surrounding social environment that promotes a caste system and the deep loyalty and gratitude to their motherland India for granting refuge that Parsis still feel, some liberal voices and those from other schools of thought argue that this explains why the orthodox Parsi community will not allow conversion and have become fixed on racial purity over the original message of a universal religion. For Irani Zoroastrians, centuries of persecution and Islamic Sharia law that condemns converts from Islam to death has effectively silenced any voiced acceptance of intermarriage and conversion, if only for fear of reprisal. This threat of reprisal against the community makes it difficult to gain an accurate insight into whether the orthodox there would be willing to accept conversion and intermarriage. This may also stem from the Irani Zoroastrian community's relative cultural isolation and might or might not be different in a more pluralistic society. Some comments on the Ushta alias indicate that there is some theological flexibility on the issue of conversion and intermarriage. In general, I have found that the Parsi community is more staunchly opposed to weakening the ethnic component of their self definition. As one respondent stated, “Membership, as far as we are concerned is via birth and breeding only- i.e. a Mazdayasni child must be navjoted or cannot claim to be a Mazdayasni Zoroastrian.”

Historical Zoroastrianism stands firm on several other issues that surprisingly I found redefined in other schools of thought. Ritual is one of these; it is an anchor and guiding force in their lives. The Navjote for example is more than a public statement of assuming the responsibilities of a true believer. It is imbued with symbolism and each act is part of acknowledging a contract with Ahura Mazda to think good thoughts, speak good words, and live good actions. With this is the acknowledgement that one is assuming the full role and responsibilities of a Mazdayasni to take up their part in helping good triumph over evil. The numerous other ritual prayers and observances such as the fire that is always kept lit in the temple, and the elaborate ritual for preparing the dead and then exposing them or burying them in concrete lined coffins are all seen as impervious to compromise. The orthodox also stand firm in Zarathushtra's special role as priest and Ahura Mazda as god. Differing perspectives will be examined shortly.

Still another difference is the focus on the power of the spoken word. For centuries, the Gāthās and the balance of the Avesta was maintained by the priests as an oral tradition. They were essentially the guardians of the sacred word and the power of the prayers that were their inheritance, and so it was their moral obligation to serve the community and protect its spiritual well being. Scriptural authority is now available to the laity with the written word as now many can study and put forth their own definitions and translations, and many have been the references made to me of the problems of having a multitude of individual interpretations:

It is human interpretation, susceptible to individual orientation that has created the confusion. This is why the "manthric word"...was never meant to be written, as this opened the Pandora's Box for consequent mis-interpretation & deformation.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

One of the biggest distinctions and points of contention between traditional/historical Zoroastrianism practiced by more orthodox members and that of the 'reformist/restorationist' perspective is what is perceived as the latter's active and deliberate tearing down of the religion by conversion, "Some Gatha-only people follow their beliefs quietly without insulting the Traditional Zarathushtis while others wage a campaign to break down the Traditional religion to

their own preferred format.” (Yahoo! Groups, 1-23-09). Thus, the fruit of the ‘written’ word of the Avestas is an increasing multitude and strength of laity voices as well as those from ‘outside’ who now have access to Zarathushtra’s words and then seek to reinterpret meaning which is historically largely the province of the priesthood. Others express their feelings much more forcefully:

These Z debating alias groups are meant to expose fakes, charlatans, fake-scholars and ignorant idiots who mess with our religion and to stop the nonsense of crass commercial Cults and their devotees!

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

In this Zoroastrian’s words one also sees a clear statement of the role of the lists and the tool the Internet provides in communication. It is the job of the ‘alias groups’ to ‘expose’ those who use the religion for commercial ventures.

Conversion is opposed for more than what is perceived as commercial gain. Discussions of conversion on the list and on websites touches on the dynamics of identity within diaspora, access to group resources, and the belief that each individual is born into the religion that Ahura Mazda deems best for them. “...it is Divine Will to have more than one religion,” and so conversion is not about converting from one religion to another but about converting, ‘one’s ‘evil or bad mentality and vices into good mentality or virtues.’⁴⁹ (Administrators 2007) Since each religion is believed to teach its followers to progress spiritually and true conversion must come from within an individual, traditional Zarathushtis see no valid reason to forsake the religion of one’s birth. “Human interference of conversion from religion to religion works against the soul’s spiritual progress.”⁵⁰ (Mistry). In the end, what is most important to remember is the feeling of many orthodox that their heritage is being stolen and sold, as one individual expressed to me: “we feel like we are being religiously raped and mauled by these wannabees and that our divine rights to the religion, held over millennia are being violated with impunity.” (2009)

Reformist/Restorationist Perspective

As to identity, I guess that it means different things to different people. I define myself as Restorationist because I believe that there is a great dichotomy between Zarathushtra’s compositions and the latter literature...Zarathushtra’s ideas are the foundation of what is loosely, in my opinion, called ‘Zoroastrianism’.

That is, his ideas are the foundation of what it is to be a Mazdayasni and, thus, they ought to be restored to their absolute primacy in matters of Doctrine and Practice

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

This is the heart of the reformist/restorationist movement within modern Zoroastrianism. There are several key individuals who support looking to the Gāthās only for scriptural authority and so define one of the most significant differences between themselves and traditional/historical Zoroastrianism. Ali Jafarey, Ronald Delavega, and Dina McIntyre are very active in the online community as well as offline. It must be emphatically stated at this point that there are variations within this group and the following is only a broad generalization of similarities and differences that make it a distinct stream of Zoroastrian thought and identity. They perceive Zarathushtra's teachings as that of a universal religion open to conversion thus drawing another distinction by allowing those not born to the religion to become members and removing the ethnic component to the identity and religion. Within this ideological perspective, the Gāthās are often turned to for guidance and clarification. Some traditional minded individuals find the single and heavy reliance on the Gāthās only and subsequent interpretations as a 'deformation' of their heritage and see it as an Islamization of Zoroastrianism as it makes them a 'people of the book'. Restorationists such as Ronald Delavega however, feel that it is the traditionalist that have become 'fixated' on ethnic imperatives in the religion and so added over the centuries rituals and restrictions that make them 'contemporary' and the 'restorationist' approach is the 'traditional' approach:

Since it is patently obvious...that the Latter Avesta disagrees with the Gāthās in both spirit and doctrine, it seems to me that they were the ones who had a 'contemporary' interpretation, we on the other hand are just returning to the original. In fact, if any one is 'traditional' it will be one following Zarathushtra's original teachings, not those who follow the latter deviated interpretations of the so called "Young Avesta"

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

With the belief that the Gāthās are the only scriptural authority, many of the rituals and practices detailed in the later writings are not seen as part of the original teachings and so are not followed in the detailed manner as that of the historical/traditional segment of the community. At

times this has been linked to Zarathushtra's revolutionary nature in defying the established sacrificial worship of multiple deities of his time:

That message, fresh today as it was 3800 years ago, shattered myths and established beliefs by challenging rites and rituals related to superstition and sacrifice, and made Zarathushtra an enemy of the rulers and priests.

(Jafarey, www.zoroastrian.org)

The restorationists/reformists hold that Zarathushtra was a sage rather than a prophet thus draws a distinction between their identity as Zoroastrians and historical Zoroastrianism, yet places them close to the monist perspective of Bard and others. Their interpretation of Ahura Mazda places them within the center of the two poles of traditional Zoroastrian belief and Bard's monist approach. They perceive Ahura Mazda as a separate creator whose energy is imminent within creation as well as transcending it; however, he does not give a list of prescribed ritual to be carefully followed. Further, Ahura Mazda is often described more as a nurturing friend rather than 'lord' to be subservient to:

Zarathushtra tells us that the end game of our capabilities, when brought to their full potential, is godlikeness and that this is the will of the creator and, indeed, His/Her purpose in creating! Thus we are not fallen disobedient creatures we, rather, immature, ignorant creatures, with huge potential. There is no need for us to be punished but for us to be taught. .. That is why the relation with God in Z theology is different. Ours is not a relationship to a king or a feudal Lord; but an alliance with a friend. For we are, potentially, so close to our Friend as to be soul mates with Her.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2008)

This also touches on a nuance of difference. Historical Zoroastrianism presents the concept of a final judgment that includes 'divine condemnation' for those that choose 'druj' (wrong, evil), a geographical hell, and prescribed practices. The essence of these concepts is not as hard edged in the restorationist perspective. Hell is not seen by some as a physical location, but a state of mind which can be eventually overcome with continual progression accomplished through the practice of 'good mind' and ethical choices.

The notion of a perfected world at the end of time is a notion found in the later Z texts, not in the Gāthās... this evolutionary process is not linked to, or accomplished at the "end of time". It is on-going. Although, logically, when all

parts of the primordial life force have attained the completely spenta way of being, then the reason for mortality (and time) would cease to exist. In that sense only, is the Gathic idea linked to the end of time.

... it is true that the "heaven" and "hell" of the later Z texts are very much in sync with the eschatological views of Christianity, and Islam (I do not know enough about Jewish views in this area). But in the Gāthās, 'heaven' and 'hell' are states of being. They exist now and in the future. They are not geographical locations to which we go after death.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

This does differ dramatically from monist perspectives often described that hold that there is no afterlife, no judgment of one's life, but only the present life and the only mandate is to make ethical choices in this life that are meant to preserve and honor the earth and strive toward building community.

Mazdayasni: a Monist Perspective

Zoroastrianism as a philosophical religion of retreats rather than a dogmatic faith of temples.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

The perspective of the contemporary Zoroastrianism of Alexander Bard and others is in fundamentally different from the interpretations above. Much of the 'flavor' of discussions from some of the more outspoken members has a heavy feel of philosophy rather than a religion; Zoroastrianism is presented as a loosely bounded set of guidelines and suggestions. "So Zoroastrianism is not really a religion at all but a complex set of beliefs and cultural codes." (Ushta, 2009) It is an interpretation of Zarathushtra's teachings that is hard to capture with a set list of practices.

It is important to note that there has begun on the list an interesting discussion that is outside the scope of this paper at present, but is important to briefly note. At one point I asked what the definition of religion as opposed to philosophy was and how does Zoroastrianism fit into this defining characteristics of a religion. It was strongly conveyed that religion and philosophy in some sense were artificial, western academic categories. Dina McClntyre responded,

...religion according to Zarathushtra means using your mind/ heart to search for what is true and right, and think it, speak it, and do it in all the many and varied circumstances of your life. In other words, it is a beneficent way of living

She further pointed out that philosophy is a 'love of wisdom' which accords well with Mazdayasna as 'worship (celebration) of wisdom'. Philosophy as a 'category' is thus represented in Zarathushtra's teachings though he does speak of a creator which places it within the scope of religion. Another pointed out that 'religion' originally came from the Latin 'relegare' that is 'ties that bind' that meant 'ties that bind man to man with a cord of love' which made it a community oriented concept which became changed to mean 'ties of love that bind man to God'. Dr. Bagli succinctly summarized the connection of philosophy and religion in the following manner tying all of these thoughts together:

all religions start as a philosophy, advocating a way of life...However as the belief in Divinity pervades though that way of life, with time, humankind makes effort to commune with the Divinity. This invariably results in the emergence of customs and rituals that transforms the philosophy to a religion. These customs and practices also contribute to some degree, the binding within a community that Perviz referred to as 'Relegare'. Almost invariably all religions, institutionalized or otherwise, encompass some kind of individual or congregational ritual practices that philosophy does not. Unfortunately at times these the practices are so heavily enforced by the institutional infrastructural hierarchy that the philosophy implied in the religion is overshadowed and the some religions become a multi-level marketing industry. Zarathushtra's philosophical teaching of Spenta way of being was essentially overshadowed in the Sasanian era of Iranian history.

(Dr. Jehan Bagli, Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

Reformists/restorationists do not recognize an ethnic component to the religion; as a universal religion it is open to all who wish to convert. This segment of the reformist/restorationist group follows the Gāthās, but only as a loose guideline and does not adhere to it as strongly as the restorationist/reformist groups lead by Jafarey and Delavega. Discussions on Ushta often draw in the philosophical teachings of Nietzsche, Spinoza and other Western philosophers. One of the first discussions I became involved in when I joined was on the nature of Ahura Mazda. It was emphasized repeatedly that Ahura Mazda was not 'god' in the traditional sense. This seemed to follow a liberalizing trajectory that places it on the outermost edge of what could be defined as Zoroastrianism. Some may insist that this shift of Zarathushtra from prophet to sage status combined with removing a belief in a divine being, coupled with a rejection of required rituals in the traditional sense except the navjote does place them outside of the group boundary.

This monist perspective of Ahura Mazda and its reinterpretation as a celebration of the 'mind' and creation as being imbued with a force but no 'god' is a defining characteristic of this path of Zoroastrianism.

Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds, (or as one individual rephrased it "wise thoughts, wise words, wide deeds") are seen as guiding principles but not within a moralistic setting that guides one to choose good from evil. These guiding principles do outline 'sacred duties' of tolerance, social responsibility and a relentless pursuit of the 'truth' or Asha. A focus on Zoroastrianism as an ethical rather than prescriptive religion is common to all three perspectives. However, the traditionalists and a prominent segment of restorationists utilize the premise of Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds as a constant reminder of their role in seeking after goodness in making ethical choices with a purpose in following Ahura Mazda. There is still a sense of a progression toward a final good, a final state of perfection, and varying degrees of belief in a life after this physical existence with a final accounting. Ahura Mazda in both cases however, still retains a divine nature as creator or creative force, and for some, a strong belief in creator as separate from the world and humanity as creation. However, for the monist, there is no 'white bearded old man in the sky'. Ahura Mazda is defined as creation itself:

MAZDAISM is the name of the religion of the MAGI and the belief in AHURA MAZDA. AHURA MAZDA refers to the beginning and end of a spectrum that encompasses the whole of creation rather than the proper name of a human like deity generically known as GOD.

AHURA means the stage of having existence and MAZDA means the stage of having a Mind. YASNI means to Celebrate and the MAZDEANS also refer to themselves as MAZDAYASNI or those who celebrate the blessings of having a Mind...The great thinker ZARATHUSHTRA or ZOROASTER is the best known teacher of the MAZDAYASNI way of life and thus ZOROASTRIANISM is another name given to this set of beliefs.

(Parviz Varjavand, 2/2/2006)⁵¹

Some on the Ushta list have sought to establish what they see as a 'third' kind of Zoroastrianism that is even closer to the original intent of Zarathushtra whom they, like Delavega and Jafarey, see as a teacher rather than a prophet. One Irani Zardoshti sees:

...three versions of Zoroastrianism; an Indian version influenced by Hinduism, an Iranian version influenced by Abrahamic and Manichean religions of the Middle East, and a Western version influenced by the great Western philosophers concerned with the ideals of freedom of man and the rights of the individual.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2008)

In the third path, there is no place for faith, something that is often seen as a quality of 'Abrahamic' faiths and is carefully pointed out as a distinguishing factor. As Mazdayasni the emphasis is on 'wisdom' and celebrating having a mind to carefully make distinctions and choices. Without a 'god' and a sense of a struggle between good and evil in a moralistic framework to make decisions within, there is seen to be no 'purpose' in creation in the traditional sense. Zarathushtra is seen as the first 'civilizationist' teaching that one should focus on the here and now and creating a world that is good and making choices for improving life now rather than looking to an improved future, life after death 'theme park in the sky'.

(change) this does not make the world a place where things would naturally strive to be good and even better. There's no such drive anywhere. It really comes down to our choices. Beyond that there's no purpose.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

we are supposed to be Mazdayasni which to me means not accepting anything that is not compatible with our wisdom... my wisdom refuses to take anything on Faith, such as faith that there is a heaven and hell theme-park... that we enter into after we die. As such, life does not have any purpose. No scientist can prove that life on earth has a predetermined purpose behind its creation. So believing in this would be Divyasna⁵² and not Mazdayasna.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2008)

Traditional Zoroastrianism, with writings of the Avesta that augment the Gāthās, has a set of guidelines and teachings that give a purpose and direction to practicing the belief. They are ways to act out the guiding principle of Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds. The Mazdayasna of Alexander Bard and others is focused rather on the celebration of the option of choice itself.

there is no celebration of the harmful mind in Zoroastrianism.. But neither is there a celebration of the constructive mind only either... What Zarathushtra celebrates is the EXISTENCE of mind and its capacity to choose. This is what the term "Mazdayasna" literally means! It is the FREEDOM of the mind which we

celebrate. Otherwise we could just celebrate robots who can do no wrong. And what's the point with that? It's a dead and unimaginative religion. The beauty is that there IS a mind and that this mind CHOOSES. The outcome of the choice is secondary and not what we celebrate as Mazdayasni.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

This is an important distinction between both the traditional approach and the reformist/restorationist approach. Dina McIntyre and others make a fine distinction pointing out that Zarathushtra teaches that one must pursue “vohu manah” or ‘good mind’ making a distinction between constructive or good mind and destructive mind which leads to destructive words and actions which does place some stress on the outcome as well as the choice itself.

There is a tension between what is seen as rational, as ‘mazda’ and searching after Asha and what is seen as the ‘folk’ elements of religion. A natural extension of not believing in ‘faith’ or interpreting things through divine intervention, this would set aside many of the traditional beliefs in the power of spoken prayers and the efficacy of ritual. I would close here with a story told by one respondent. It explains how this tension can be balanced, illustrates the distinction between a religion that celebrates the mind and other “Abrahamic” traditions, and points out what he sees as an important difference between the restorationist/reformist path of Jafarey and Delavega that seeks to remove these ‘folk’ beliefs. Stories of miracles and divine beings are Zoroastrian culture from a monist Mazdayasni viewpoint and important to preserve.

We have a dear man on this list that strongly believes that a savior by the name of Shah Bahram Varjavand is going to come and end all of man's miseries. He has a standing army that is invincible and reside inside a mountain called Damavand. Now I grew up with this myth, my grand father was named Shah Bahram and my son I named Shah Bahram. Tehran is near Damavand and we often take hikes there and I used to take my kids (when they were kids) to Mt. Damavand for ski. I used to put my kids to bed telling them stories about Shah Bahram Varjavand coming on his white elephant with his army that dwells in this magic mountain. As children, they loved it, and when the going would get rough, they would look at that beautiful peak and wish that the legend was true...

There is a shrine in Tehran dedicated to Shah Vrahram Izad and on Vrahram day it is jam-packed with Zoroastrians who come to pray there and cook delicious foods to offer to other pilgrims. So I am not alone in loving this legend and the man and the mountain. We celebrate all this and enjoy it fully and every one of us knows that we are having Dey Yasni fun, that there is no white elephant and a standing army in the magic mountain...

When Christianity got hijacked from its Mithraic roots into a Judaic tradition, the distinction between Dey-Yasna and Mazda-Yasna got thrown out of the window and only Dey Yasna remained. You HAVE to believe that Christ rose from the dead and da da deda deda... on and on, or else you are not a Christian. The religion has nothing but Dey-Yasna to offer with such demands as a prerequisite of the faith.

The Pristine Purifiers of Zoroastrianism have a strong agenda against Shah Vrahram and many other Dey traditions of the religion. Alex and I were opposed to this kind of Purification of the religion all along. A sane and healthy mind will quickly sort out what is Dey-Yasna and what is Mazda-Yasna; it is all in the art of how you tell the Mt. Damavand story to your kids. Do you break their minds with Dey-expectations piled upon them or do you teach them how to have fun with the Dey or the Deity at times and get right back to Mazda.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2008)

Living History Online-Ethnographic Narrative

I firmly believe that if we know where we are from, take note of historical events; we have an excellent blueprint in determining our future. After all the Z faith considers the excuse of "fate" to belong to those who have strayed from the Truth (A-sha)

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

For Zoroastrians history is identity and through history, interpretive when used to define legitimacy of sacred text. In order to understand the online debates fully, a further look at Zoroastrian history as it is presented online is necessary. The rich history of the Zoroastrians is also one of the ancient Persian Empires and is a source of pride and inspiration for members of the community. The community, like others in the process of revitalization, in its endeavors to renew and strengthen itself and address the challenges to its membership cited earlier, looks to a golden past. Sometimes idealized, this past reminds the community of its achievements and creates a consensus across membership regardless of theological orientation. However, both the traditional and reform movements within the religion are formed within the historical realities of invasion and diaspora. The Zoroastrian vision of the past also reminds them and us of the genesis of the modern subdivisions of the community.

Zoroastrians create communities of affirmation both on and offline through the common bond of their shared past. This sense of community is often to provide a 'safe haven' or 'free space' not from persecution or criticism from groups outside their community, but from strongly dissenting

opinions within. Online this is developed largely through resource sites as well as through social networking. Zoroastrians use this access to sources of history, archaeology, and art to teach and reinforce a Zoroastrian identity and a pride in this religious and ethnic identity – this living history creates for Zoroastrians a sense of who they are, where they come from, and what makes them unique. The historical narrative is used by Zoroastrians to create a cultural artifact in the form of their presence on the internet. This cultural artifact, in turn, is used as a tool to shape the social agendas of participants in both the traditional and reformist movements, as they conflict over solutions to core issues that face their people. The shared history is used as a litmus test for proposed compromises and changes to doctrine and practice.

The following documents the history of the Zoroastrian religion using as primary resources the sites and online resources that Zoroastrians themselves use to create and share their visions of their past. I supplement these sources with main line scholarly resources wherever such scholarship fills in details that are missing or glossed over in Internet resources. My point in writing in this way is twofold. It illustrates the process of identity formation I describe in the paragraphs above as well as presenting a compact vision and understanding of facets of Zoroastrian culture. It is a way of duplicating the process of the researcher's gradually developing understanding and impressions of the community as they were gleaned from examining sites.

Birth of a Prophet/Visionary

Hail! Born for us is the priest Spitama Zarathushtra!

(www.zav.org.au/pages/zar.htm)

The rich history of the Zoroastrians begins on the Asian steppes. Until approximately the fourth to the third millennium, the Indo-Aryans lived as pastoralists. Learning to domesticate oxen and later the horse to pull carts and later war-chariots, they began to develop the use of bronze technology and warfare. In approximately 1400-1200 B.C.53, as the Indo-Aryans split into two distinct tribes, the Indians and the Iranians, the Indians moved south from the steppes across Central Asia into India bringing an end to the Harappa civilization; the Iranians –at this point consisting of the Mede and Persian tribes - moved instead southwest into the Iranian plateau (vohuman.org, zoroastrianism.com, ahuramazda.com, www3.sympatico.ca/Zoroastrian). The

Persians settled in the province that came to be called Pars - named for the tribe - and eventually, Persia (Boyce 2004, Mahmoudi 1973). The Medes and Persians moved into an area of city states and the strong civilizations of Susa, Elam, and Babylon. Persia is now known as Iran⁵⁴ and much of Iranian culture and history is entwined with Zoroastrianism which evolved in Pars-occupied areas of what is now northeastern Iran. It spread eventually to western Iran and enters recorded history from the ninth century B.C. when the Medes and Persians are repeatedly mentioned in Assyrian records of military expeditions (Boyce 2004).

Sometime between 1500 and 1200 BC, near the beginning of the Bronze Age, Zarathushtra (meaning Golden Star or owner of the yellow camels)⁵⁵, known to the west from the Greek translation "Zoroaster," was born into a semi-nomadic life somewhere in Northern Iran (zarathushtra.com, zoroastrian.org, avesta.org). One site places his birth at 1768 BC (webzc.com). "Tradition says Zarathushtra was born on 6th of Farvardin 30 Before Zarathushtrian Religious Era (26 March 1767 B.C.E.) (zoroastrian.org). His father was Pourushaspa Spitaman who "raised cattle and was famous for his horses" and his mother was Dughdova "known for her enlightened ideas" and was "open-minded" (zoroastrian.org, ahuramazda.com, avesta.org, zarathushtra.com, vohuman.org.). "Pourushaspa belonged to a line of hereditary priests of the Mazdayasni religion and we know that Zarathushtra himself trained and practiced as a priest." (zav.org.au) Zarathushtra was marked as special from birth. According to the narrative of the Zoroastrian Association of Victoria:

Legend would have us believe that Zarathushtra in fact laughed out loud at the moment of his birth and that this laughter so unusual in a new born babe and therefore considered miraculous, foretold the destruction of all darkness, evil and misery in this world. A much anticipated savior had been born.

(<http://www.zav.org.au/pages/zar.htm>)

Some recount further that his favored nature was evident even before his birth for when his mother was 5 months pregnant, "...she had a dream in which she saw the world was being destroyed, and she was very frightened. But then an angel came to her in her dream, and told her that she was bearing a great prophet who would be able to change the impending destruction." (zarathushtra.com/z/life/earlyyears.htm). It is further recounted at (ahuramazda.com) that the king

sought to kill the infant Zarathustra variously by such means as throwing him into fire or placing him in a cave of wolves. Invariably, these attempts are all spoiled by the inherent goodness of the child. Protected from evil, he grew into an inquisitive and thoughtful young man.

The people faced a time of change and increasing violence.

The rule of Ashâ became imperiled by these godless greedy men who worshipped mainly the daevas rather than the ethical Ahuras. The victims were suffering and in distress, creating the classical situation for a prophet to arise to offer salvation through consolation and hope to the people.

(Shroff 1996:pg.1)

In this polytheistic culture in a time of social upheaval, Zarathushtra came to hold a priesthood position and when he was about twenty he went into the wilderness to ponder and seek an answer to the increasing violence and uncertainty of life. After ten years, one morning he goes to collect water from the river:

It was around dawn. The sky had just turned color and the sun was about to rise. As he had gone into the waters of the river, Vohu Mana (the angel of the Good Mind) appears to him, and opens the portal to the Divine Light of Ahura Mazda. This was the first moment of Illumination and the first Revelations of Zarathushtra.

In his vision, he perceived Ahura Mazda as the Wise Lord of Creation, and the six emanations of Ahura Mazda, the Amesha Spentas as the guardians and artisans of this physical world. He perceived the laws upon which the universe operated, and understood the inter-relationship between Ahura Mazda, the Amesha Spentas, and the Creation.

(zarathushtra.com)

He returned home to spread the message of change and converted his wife, children⁵⁶ and first cousin, but was able to convert only a handful of countrymen to the new concept of a single god and a religion where man held responsibility for helping Ahura Mazda through good words, good thoughts, and good deeds to defeat evil and bring about the final cleansing and renewal of the world. He traveled ever southward seeking a home where others would hear and accept his message and eventually came to the court of King Vishtaspa. At first the king was receptive to his message, but some of the court were jealous and planted objects of "black magic". The king was

convinced and searched his rooms; on finding these objects, he ordered Zarathushtra imprisoned. Legend then says that the king's favorite "dark horse was struck with an incurable deforming disease" where "his legs went into his stomach" and none of the court physicians could affect a cure (ahuramazda.com, zarathushtra.com). Zarathushtra healed the horse of its disease and thus earned the warm support of the king who converted and made Zoroastrianism the religion of the land. Legend is recounted in detail – to date only at ahuramazada.com - of the ceremony then performed in the king's court:

After the ceremony (Jashan)⁵⁷ was over the grape juice was given to king Gustasp. It enabled the king to see into the future and could also see his place in the heaven. Peshotan, the king's son was offered the milk. He became immortal by drinking it. Vazir Jamasp was made to smell the flowers of Jashan and that made him omniscient....Aspandiyar, the second son of Gustasp was given granules of pomegranate to eat. This made his body as strong as bronze.

(ahuramazda.com)

One other legend is related on a single website:

... Zarathushtra marked his success by founding the "Nîmrûz" (meridian) observatory in the delta, perhaps on the tiny island on the Hamun Lake. This Mount Ushidarena, House of Science, is mentioned several times in the Avesta. It is known at present by the name Kûh-e Khvâjeh, Mount of Lord... It was indeed the "center" of the old civilized world. It stood 61 degrees longitude and 31 degrees north latitude.

(zoroastrian.org)

Zarathushtra continued to teach all who would listen and died at the age of 77. Again, shrouded in millennia of history and a paucity of historical records from the ravages of burned libraries and invasions, legend is brought forth to record his death. Some stories relate his peaceful death in sleep (zoroastrian.org, zarathushtra.com, ahuramazda.com, vohuman.org), other legends end his life as a martyr slain with eighty other priests at prayer by the Turanian army, that Zarathushtra ascended to the heavens, and that he was struck by a thunderbolt from the sky (zarathushtra.com)

From State Religion to World Diaspora

Zoroastrianism became the official religion of each of the three Persian Empires: The Achaemenid Empire from 549-330B.C., the Arsacid Empire from 220-227B.C., and the Sasanian

Empire from 220-651 A.D. and during the Parthian period from 248-224B.C. (almost all sites). Fire Temples are the heart of Zoroastrian ritual and were begun during the Achaemenian period. "By the end of that dynasty the three types of fires, Atash Behram, Atash Adaran and Atash Dadgah had a recognized place in Zoroastrian society." (www3.sympatico.ca/Zoroastrian_ahuramazda.com) Adur Farnbag, Adur Gushnasp and Adur Burzen Mihr, the three great fires of Zoroastrianism were installed during the Parthian period. Many of these fire temples were destroyed in successive conquests of Persia by Arabs, Turks and Mongols. (www3.sympatico.ca/Zoroastrian_ahuramazda.com, vohuman.org). Another important point made is the influence of Zoroastrianism on religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (ahuramazda.com, ahura.homestead.com, Kuwait Zoroastrian Society). Ahuramazda.com and ahura.homestead.com both suggest that it was during the Achaemenian empire that Judaism adopted some of the 'prophet's' main teachings and then transmitted them to Christianity and later Islam.

Cyrus the Great is a central figure in accounts of Zoroastrian history both on and offline and is a central figure in the living history Zoroastrians use to define themselves. His edict inscribed on a stone cylinder now kept at the United Nations office in New York is proudly and repeatedly cited as the oldest Human Right's Charter (www.gatha.org). Fariborz Rahnmoon, the webmaster of ahuramazda.com, emphasizes Cyrus' tolerance of other beliefs quoting this charter:

I ordered that no one is permitted to abuse anybody or to damage the cities. I ordered that no house should be damaged and no one's property should be violated and ransacked. I ordered that everybody should keep to his/her belief system and be free to worship his/her own God. I ordered that all the people should be free in their thoughts, choosing the place of their residence and no one should violate the rights of others.

Rahnmoon further relates several other achievements of the Persian Empire of the Achaemenians. So close is the association between the Empire and Zoroastrianism that these are seen as the direct result of the teachings of Zarathushtra: "Up to the reign of the Hakhamaneshenians (Achaemenians), the Persian Empire 500-320BCE, the teachings of Zarathushtra had still survived and were understood and followed in its original form. Persians used their wisdom, made wise decisions, and instead of building temples built highways and

underground waterways.” What is presented on the website is then a glorified history of the Zoroastrian religion as entwined with being Persian which impacts society on basic levels of growth, infrastructure and social responsibility rather than only religious in concerns and material production. Persian becomes synonymous with Zoroastrian. He goes on to state that they mapped the depth of the waters from the Ganges to the Red Sea to make transportation by sea safe, connected the Nile from the Red Sea to the Suez Cannel, and, “...all this and more is proof enough to vouch the influence of the Gāthās during that period.” It is during the Achaemenid Empire that the Gāthās and the Avestan scriptures, up to then a purely oral tradition, were first committed to written form. Alexander of Macedonia invaded in 334 B.C. destroying the library at Persepolis and many of the ancient texts. The second empire of the Parthian state began to again gather the Zoroastrian texts of religion, philosophy, medicine preserved by priests in oral tradition and ritual. There are brief references at ahuramazda.com, zarathushtra.com, ahura.homestead.com, zoroastrian.org, and blagoverie.org/eng/anjoman/index.phtml to the efforts of the Sasanian Empire in restoring the sacred texts by completing the collecting of writings of Zoroaster and the final transcribing of the oral tradition to written word. These comprised the texts of the state religion until the Arab Muslim invasion of 650 A.D. and the end of Zoroastrian secular and sacred power.

The fortunes of the Zoroastrian religion declined with that of the empire succumbing to invasion by Arab Muslims in 650 A.D. The Arab conquerors “demanded books as ransom from the Iranians and burnt them. They cut the fingers of scholars...They burnt scholars in the pyre of their books.” (ahura.homestead.com) Dr. Jahanian Daryoush speaks passionately in an article on the site Vohuman of the invasion: “The cultural calamity was disastrous. Books were burned, scholars slain and schools and libraries were destroyed because the invaders regarded the Koran as the last book that nullified the existing ones.” (Jahanian 2005:pg.1). This persecution and large scale killing of Zoroastrians for approximately the next two hundred years brings about the immigration of Zoroastrians to India sometime between 910-950 A.D. and the start of the Zoroastrian Diaspora.

A large group from the Iranian province of Khorasan (ancient Parthia) made their way south to the port of Hormuzd on the Persian Gulf. Here they were able to take a ship to the island known as Diu near the west coast of India where, according to tradition, they lived for nineteen years. They then sailed to the mainland. The sea became fierce and threatened the lives of those on board. They prayed for divine help promising to build an Atash Behram⁵⁸ if Behram, the Yazata of Victory, would spare their lives. Their prayers brought them to Gujarat, the west coast province of India. (www3.sympatico.ca/Zoroastrian, ahuramazda.com, tenets.zoroastrianism.com) The Hindu king Jadav Rana granted them refuge gifting them with land to establish a new community. This gift came with several conditions: Parsis should speak the local Gujarati language, not carry weapons, women should wear Hindu dress, and marriage ceremonies should be done after sunset as were Hindu marriages (Bhujwala 1998). Here they became known as the Parsis. It is said that the High Priest elected to speak for them asked for a glass of milk and sugar. He poured the sugar into the milk and explained that as the sugar had dissolved into the milk so the Parsis would blend into the existing community, adding value rather than being a burden (Hirjikaka 2008)(Kuwait Zoroastrian Association, MainstreamZoroastrians) Parsis consecrated a fire temple in their new home named Sanjan⁵⁹ within 100 years of settling in their new homeland thus fulfilling their promise to Behram Yazata for safe passage and deliverance from the storm.

In 1297 A.D. Sanjan was invaded by Muslims which threatened the safety of the Atash Behram. Carefully guarded by priests, the sacred fire was moved several times until finally being installed in Navsari at the invitation of the Bhagarias, a group of Parsis living there. It soon became the center of Parsi religious life. The Parsis again faced a threat to the safety of their way of life in 1572 A.D. when the Emperor Abar of the Mogul Dynasty of India took control of Gujarat. A priest was again selected to represent the community and sue for favor. According to ahuramazda.com, Meherji Rana was selected and impressed the Emperor so favorably that he ordered the sacred fire to be kept burning in his court day and night according to the custom of the ancient Persian kings. Furthermore, the jizyad, a tax imposed on all non-Muslims, was rescinded for the Parsi community.

The history of the sacred fire is also the history of the Parsi expansion and social structure of the community. Navsari continued grow under the protection of the Mogul dynasty and become leaders in trade, industry such as ship building, and as merchants. This prosperity grew the Parsi community and the Sanjanas began to insist on the right to perform all ceremonies instead of sharing it with the Bhagarias. A Hindu court decreed that the Sanjanas must honor their original agreement to serve the fire only. (www3.sympatico.ca/Zoroastrian, ahuramazda.com). In 1741, unwilling to do so, they took the Atash Behram to Udwada/Udvada where it still burns today though under threat of global warming as the sea steadily encroaches (Dastoor 2008). The power of history and tradition plays heavily here in the story of the Parsis. Both www3.sympatico.ca/Zoroastrian and www.ahuramazda.com state that the legend of bringing the original fire from Persia, continuously burning in its travels, to eventually reside in Udwada began at this time. The Bhagarias soon consecrated an Atash Behram of their own in Navsari in 1765. "A little jealous" of this new, rival fire the Sanjans created the name "Iranshah" for their sacred fire and began stories that this fire had been brought with them from Persia so enhancing the legitimacy and age of theirs that it continues drawing pilgrims to this day. The Kuwait Zoroastrian Association web page, relates a rich tale of the Atash Behram fire's consecration as a "thanksgiving to the Supreme Lord, 'Ahura Mazda'. The Fire was called IRANSHAH, giving it a kingly status and dedicating it to Iran, Prophet Zarathustra's birthplace." Legend is recounted of how a Parsi commander named Ardeshir Babekan lead soldiers in the battle against the Muslims. While praying, a "YAZAD (angel)" came to him and told him that the fire must be moved to the caves in the Bahrot Hills if he was defeated. After his defeat, the holy fire was moved there for twelve years then moved to Udwada/Udvada where, "the Holy Fire is alive and burning as the Highest Grade of Consecrated Fire in the World."

Parsis became an integral part of the social fabric of India becoming leaders in industry and politics. Often quoted is Mahatma Ghandi who stated " Parsis, in numbers beneath contempt, but in deeds, beyond compare!" (kzamembers.wetpaint.com). In the eighteenth century, supported by expanding commerce and trade, Surat became the largest center of the Zoroastrian population in the world. (ahuramazda.com, www3.sympatico.ca/Zoroastrian). The UNESCO Assisted Parsi

Zoroastrian Project at unescoparzor.com relates a legend to illustrate the intermingling and cross-cultural respect. They relate how a Parsi officer, Ardeshir Dhanjisha Bahadur, sought to remove the 'dacoits' (robbers and thieves) that ravaged Surat at the beginning of the nineteenth century. His success won him a special medal in 1830 from the British. Perhaps of deeper importance for its weaving of the Parsis into the fold tradition and social fabric of India was the act of the Sahjanand Maharaj. In gratitude, he removed his Pheta (turban) and placed it at the feet of Ardeshir. Today it is kept in the home of his descendants where people travel to see it as it is believed to have miraculous powers.

As Parsi individuals and families rose to prominence, they contributed to the growth of Fire Temples and the strengthening of community identity. Lovji Wadia, a ship builder, founded the earliest consecrated Adaran fire in Siganpur, close by. Bombay became a British possession in 1661 and with the efforts of the East India Company to make it a thriving port, a steady flow of Parsi settlers strengthened the community there. Soon, in 1672 and 1709 Dar-i-Mirs⁶⁰ were established and a second Adaran in 1735 by Maneckji Seth (www3.sympatico.ca/Zoroastrian,ahuramazda.com). Both sites list the eight Atash Behrams in India and ahuramazda.com provides a link to utilize the visual resources of the Internet to make images of these historical treasures of the Parsi community available for viewing. The Parsi community came to be an integral part of the social fabric of India admired for industriousness, compassion and ethics. Most importantly they were allowed to follow and practice tradition and ritual openly. This separation of Zoroastrians into core communities in Iran and India plays an important part in the narrative of Zoroastrians today. First, what of those left behind within the Irani Zoroastrian community after the invasion and the exodus to India?

From State Religion to Underclass - Those Who Remained Behind

Zoroastrian websites provide little of the history of those who remained in Persia after the Arab conquest and exodus to India. Of the few references, ahuramazda.com states, "Over the millennium, a small band of faithful Zoroastrians have continued to live in Iran and have tried to preserve their culture and religious traditions as best as possible." The Kuwait Zoroastrian Association (kzamembers.wetpaint.com) states, "Those who remained behind have survived

centuries of persecution, systematic slaughter, forced conversion, heavy taxes, etc. They now number only about 18,000 and reside chiefly in Yazd, Kerman and Tehran in what is now Iran". This contrasts sharply with the other figures of 157,000 (Rivetna 2002). Vohuman, an educational Zoroastrian website, is the only online source to provide a detailed voice that relates the life of Irani Zoroastrians after the Arab conquest and exodus to India.

Much of the evidence for Zoroastrianism in Iran after the conquest is related on Iranian cultural sites rather than Zoroastrian specific sites. These sites illustrate the difference between the Iranian non-Zoroastrian construction of self and the Zoroastrian construction of self. This becomes a crucial point in understanding Zoroastrianism today and the discussions of conversion and definitions of who may be accepted as Zoroastrian. This is a perspective that will be more carefully discussed at the conclusion of this chapter. This portrait of Irani Zoroastrians from Zoroastrian websites and Iranian cultural sites will be supplemented with offline sources such as Mary Boyce (2004) and others to flesh out the history of the Irani Zoroastrians and important events that contribute to essential differences in the Irani and Parsi communities today. After a necessarily brief view into the story of the Zoroastrians who remained behind, the narrative will pick up the threads of the Irani and Parsi Zoroastrian community and bring in the threads of the Diaspora communities across the world to address who the Zoroastrians are today.

The Arab invasion of the mid seventh century was the beginning of Zoroastrianism's transformation from an official state religion of an empire to that of Iran's 'other religion'⁶¹. The Arabs were lead by Sheikh Saffi Ardbili, a Sunni Moslem. At the time of his invasion, there were approximately four million who, "had preserved the old religion" (Jahanian 2005:pg.1). One site simply states, "For centuries after the Muslim invasion in 652 AD Zoroastrians in Iran practiced their faith in quiet seclusion." (webzc.com/about.htm). Other sources elaborate on the difficulties and repression that was the life of Irani Zoroastrians. They were required to wear a yellow patch to distinguish them from others, laws were enacted that awarded all of an inheritance to a member of a family who converted to Islam, a religious tax or *jizya* was imposed and those who could not or would not pay were tortured, had their property confiscated, forced to convert or killed. Despised as Gabre or Gavre, they were, "(Kafir) or faithless, and the Zoroastrian ghettos

were called “Gavrestan” which in Persian is reminiscent of “Goorestan” or cemetery.” (Jahanian 2005:pg.1). An interesting article from Payvand’s Iran News was posted to MainstreamZoroastrians that related how Zoroastrians in Yazd were allowed to follow their religion but, “had white paint splashed around their doors, could not have badgirs (wind catching towers) on their houses and curiously were not allowed to carry umbrellas. Later it became the practice for local people to paint their doors white as well, in support of the minority”⁶². (Sayyah and Sanford 2008)

During the rule of the Shah Abbas the Great from 1587-1628 A.D., many of the leaders of the community were ‘massacred’. The Shah practiced a harsh policy of repression for fear of reversion of Iranians to their ancient religion, something that is still of deep concern today (Journeymanpictures 1999, Pocha 2003). The Irani and Parsi communities had been separated for several hundred years, but by this time had reestablished communications. The Zarathushtis of Yazd wrote to Parsis in India to tell of the Shah’s confiscation of sacred texts. “They murdered two Mobeds who refused to surrender them.” The clerics of the time stated, “Jihad against them is a religious duty until they convert to Islam or promise that will not commit adultery with Moslem women (marrying them).” (Jahanian 2005:pg.2). The “systematic efforts to wipe out the Zoroastrian community of Iran” (Bakhradnia 2005:pg.4) continued to relatively recent times. At the turn of the 18th century during the reign of the Shah Sultan Hossein, the last Safavid king, a decree was issued that all Zoroastrians must convert to Islam. Jahanian states that the French estimate that over 80,000, nearly all, were killed. By the 1850’s, the French ambassador to Iran, Count de Boutineau states, “Only 7000 of them remain and only a miracle may save them from extinction. They teach a lesson to the world that glory is not everlasting, because these are descendants of the people that one day ruled the world.” (Jahanian 2005:pg.3). This is a far cry from a population of four million in the mid seventh century. I noted earlier the relative silence of Zoroastrian Internet sites on the narrative of the Irani Zoroastrians. Jahanian makes the following striking statement: “...our books of history have maintained a total silence toward the dreadful massacre of Zoroastrians in central Iran and the coercive and violent conversion of Mazandaran. In the latter case usually a distorted picture of peaceful self-conversion is presented.” (pg. 3)

Here the history of Irani Zoroastrians becomes mute online. Jahanian illustrates the extremes she believes to be the life of Irani Zoroastrians from the invasion of the Arabs to relatively recent times to contradict “a distorted picture of peaceful self-conversion”. The vision is of a life of constant violence, threat of death and oppressive subjugation or peaceful self-conversion to the Islamic faith. Boyce (2004) explores the middle ground between the two. Unlike Alexander of Macedonia who was intent on conquest looting and destroying much of the Persian Empire and the Fire Temples and libraries, the Arabs were focused on conquest with the aim to bring subjugation as opposed to conversion. Islam thus moved through the Persian Empire driven by the vision set forth in the Surah 9.29 of the Quran: “Fight those who believe not in God and the Last Day and do not forbid what Allah and his Messenger have forbidden-such men as practice not the religion of truth, being people of the book-until they pay tribute out of hand and have been humbled.” (Boyce, 2004:pg.145) Subjugation did not always bring conversion; those that paid and endured humiliation would be allowed to continue to practice. Early orthodox caliphs left those who paid their taxes and conformed to these laws largely alone. As Boyce (2004) documents, Islamic piety increasingly conflicted creating an environment where they were constantly made to feel inferior as several laws and restrictions gradually evolved to enforce this. A law abiding Zoroastrian would be allowed to practice, but anyone in the family who converted would by law become the sole inheritor. A law abiding Zoroastrian might practice, but they would be forced to wear special clothing, paint their doors white, and observe other visible indications to always remind them of their inferior and ‘outside’ status. Wholesale killing and forced conversions were events that punctuated a state of constant, moderate repression and a relentless conversion of fire temples into mosques. Self conversion and the constant development of accommodations are also documented that show the complexity of Iranian identity that exists today. “...Islam took root and came to flourish everywhere...In the process it grew steadily more Zoroastrianized, with adaptations of funerary rites and purity laws, and a cult of saints springing up in place of the veneration of Yazads.” (Boyce 2004:152).

The Turkish invasions of the early eleventh century followed by the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century each inflicted renewed periods of destruction of sacred texts and the death of

priests and men of learning. Of the Mongol invasion Boyce quotes E.G. Browne's *A Literary History of Persia*, vol. II, "The loss suffered by Muslim learning, which never again reached its former level, defies description and almost surpasses imagination: not only were thousands of priceless books utterly annihilated, but, owing to the number of men of learning who perished or barely escaped with their lives, the very tradition of accurate scholarship...was almost destroyed (pg. 463)" (Boyce 2004, pg.161). In this atmosphere of persecution it is suggested that this is the most likely period that the last great collections of Zoroastrian sacred texts, including every copy of the Sasanian Avesta was destroyed as every major fire temple that had survived to that point. Remaining unnoticed was the last, best defense under the Mongolian Khans and at this point remote places such as Yazd became havens for the observance of ritual, fire temples, and priests. Kerman, a remote oasis also provided succor for a small Zoroastrian community. Thus in relative isolation they were able to carefully preserve both their unique identity and religious practices. It is important to take a moment here to note that with each invasion in India the Parsi community impressed the incoming rulers and was allowed to continue to practice their religion openly where as with each invasion, the Irani community was again relentlessly hunted anew. Each time they sustained more deaths and imposed conversion that reduced the strength and influence of the priesthood and resulted in greater loss of the original 21 books of the Avesta. The weakening of the Irani community and declining numbers of priesthood and the strengthening of the Parsi community and a strong priesthood sets the stage for a shifting of authority on matters of tradition and ritual that will continue to affect the identity of Zoroastrians as both communities move through the centuries today's Diaspora.

Returning to the historical thread of these two communities, the Irani and Parsi communities established ties in 1269 with the visit of Rustam Mihraban to India and so the threads of the two separate communities again become entwined. Mihraban Kay Khosrow, a famous priestly copyist was then invited to India in the early 1300's (Boyce 2004) pg. 170. The balance of authority within these exchanges long rested with the Irani Zoroastrians as the authority of the homeland. The ties that developed between the two communities led to profitable and community sustaining links between Zoroastrians of southern Persia and those of Bombay (Boyce 2004:pg.218). By the early

eighteenth century, the thriving Parsi community in Bombay also brought with them priests of different 'panths'⁶³. With no ecclesiastical authority, a disagreement arose over how the 'padan' or mouth-veil should be tied over the faces of the dead and if the dead should be laid with legs extended or crossed. Dastur Jamasp was invited in 1720 to visit from Iran, as the mother land and thus superior in authority and wisdom; however he left with the Parsis still debating funerary practices as well as the calendar. Eventually this dispute became divisive and anger at Iranis who supported the Kadmis calendar produced a shift so that, "...after this time the majority of Parsis ceased to look to the Iranis for counsel in matters of the faith." (Boyce, 2004:pg.190).

This shift plays a significant role in understanding the position of the Parsi community today in the Diaspora and discussions and events that continue to shape Zoroastrian identity today. The thread of transformation that began with the transplantation and early isolation of the Parsi community strengthens with increased urbanization, increased education, and increasing strength of laity involvement from the eighteenth century to present. The history of both communities from the late 1700's to the early 1900's briefly presented here to conclude the historical overview of the Zoroastrian community will develop this thread of transformation to show the creation of two core communities with nuanced differences in social structure and tradition creating both as strong centers of community identity and a strong laity.

The Irani community saw continued fighting during the 1700's with the invasion of the Afghans in 1719. Repeated, violent changes of Shahs continued with brief respites until the final assention of the Qajar Agha Muhammad in 1796 whose dynasty ruled until 1925. The early period of the Qajars rule beginning one of the most repressive periods and lowest ebb of Irani Zoroastrian fortunes.

At this same time, Gujarat was also in turmoil as Muslim nobles, Maratha princes, and European merchants vied for control. In 1759 with the East India Company assumed final control of Surat and began encouraging the shift of trade and population to Bombay which was considered safer. With the strong presence of the Parsi community in commerce, many moved to Bombay. More interested in mercantile pursuits, the Company encouraged each group to choose

their own representatives to govern their internal affairs. The English, in a concession to the Hindu majority, adopted their term 'panchayat' for the governing body (Boyce 2004).

A Parsi Panchayat comprised of a traditional Zoroastrian council of elders with no working priests among its first nine members was created in 1728. Bombay did not have a corresponding priestly body such as the Bhagarsath Anjoman in Navsari to make authoritative determinations on matters as the upkeep of the dakhmas⁶⁴. Fire temples, being endowed by wealthy laymen, were often in control of trustees drawn mostly from a founder's family and so priests were appointed. In this vacuum of ecclesiastical leadership, the Panchayat now became the administrative body for many social and ecclesiastical matters such as marriage, purity laws, intermarriage, and administration of charitable funds traditionally the work of the 'akabir' or elders. Continued prosperity and the demands to maintain such success in commerce pushed boundaries of purity laws and those of moderate means began to increasingly provide their children with a Western education. During his years in Surat from 1759 to 1761 a young French scholar, Anquetil du Perron, persuaded Darab Kumana then an influential priest, to translate the Avesta for him. As the sacred texts had been essentially the province of the priesthood, this was considered a betrayal by the community. His work became a standard that would eventually fuel the belief that the original work by Hyde was the true Irani religion and the later texts as corruptions of the original teachings.

Eventually a reform movement in 1851 was begun under the aegis of the Zoroastrian Reform Society which pushed for modest reform to 'modernize the faith' (Boyce 2004, pg.200). Debates between reformist and traditionalists intensified amid continued scholarship from the West and increasing scholarship among laity and priesthood alike. Reformist centered on the Gāthās as the oldest and so most accurate of the sacred texts with the Avestas, as determined by Western scholars such as Hyde, Martin Haug and E.W. West, to be a corruption of the original faith. This 'learned' perspective encouraged reformists to approach the religion insisting that Zoroaster had taught a simple monotheism with little ritual and wished the community to return to this vision. Other schools were founded and many of the sons of the priesthood, "...having had an education in critical scholarship, wished to continue as a practicing priest....instead of the most intelligent of

a priest's sons following his profession, it began to be the dullards, and so the prestige of the priesthood sank still further." (Boyce 2004: pg.202). This was further compounded by additional interpretations of 'one of the noblest, simplest, most sublime religions of the world' (Boyce 2004 quoting Olcott) by Henry S. Olcott in 1885 on his arrival in Bombay. His view focused on the teachings of Zoroaster as an occult science and encouraged the Parsis to preserve their rituals with an exacting perfection. This gave fuel to an exclusively Zoroastrian occult movement known as the Ilm-I Khshnum. These three perspectives- orthodox, reformist, and occult- supported differing views of doctrine; however the community still remained united in forms of worship. This development's importance lays in its strengthening of laity involvement in interpretation and the encouragement of strongly presented viewpoints that travels with the Diaspora and continues in today's discussion of Zoroastrian identity.

The last three paragraphs provide a summation of close to two hundred years of Parsi history began with the Parsi Panchayat of Bombay (BPP). It comes full circle to conclude with modern Zoroastrian society today and the importance of the BPP that even now reaches its influence into the debate of Zoroastrian identity with the first election of BPP officials hotly debated on and offline in 2008. As the Parsi community continued to thrive and grow, numerous other local Anjomans and panchayat's were established with the BPP as the apex custodian and authority of the consolidated funds and debates on social practice. Priests may pass determinations as to the validity of intermarriage and funerary rites within the Towers of Silence, but the BPP has become perhaps more important as the arena in which social views and politics are played out for the direction of Zoroastrian identity from close interaction in the secular realms of legal actions and rulings. This influence is being felt increasingly within the Diaspora as Parsis have moved but maintained close contact through the Internet.

The communication between the two communities between the 1200's and up to the early 1800's had consisted of letters and infrequent travel of priests between Iran and India. In the late 1700's travel had been forbidden Irani Zoroastrians further limiting in person exchanges and collaboration on translations and teaching. In 1796, with the threat of the abduction of his daughter, a father living in Kerman secretly escaped to India where his daughter Golestan

married a well-to-do merchant. This had far reaching impacts on both communities. Her husband, for her sake, aided other Irani refugees that found their way to India; their eldest son later established a fund to move this work forward in 1834, and another son in 1854 established the Society for the Amelioration of the Conditions of the Zoroastrians in Persia. This lifeline was to encourage more than the exchange of scholarship and points of doctrine; it encouraged active immigration of beleaguered Irani Zoroastrians.

Another act with far reaching effects was the transfer of Manekji Limji Hataria to India by the Society. Manekji was a small trader deeply devoted to his faith and community. At the time of the invasion and fall of the Sasanian Empire to the Arab conquest in the mid seventh century there were an estimated four million Zoroastrians. At the time of Manekji's arrival in Iran in 1854, he reported 6,658 in Yazd and its surrounding villages, only 450 in and around Kerman, and 50 in the capital of Tehran. A very small few also still survived in Shiraz. Compare this to the population of the Parsis in the same decade at 20 percent of the population with an estimated 110,544 in Bombay alone (Boyce, 2004:pg.210). In a replication of the changes within India, Manekji pushed for and helped establish schools to provide Zoroastrians with a Western style education. Of perhaps equal if not more immediate impact was the abolition of the jizya in 1882 after intense efforts again by Manekji. This marked an ascent to wealth through commerce as the Parsis propelled by the communities reputation for industry and honesty. Manekji convinced the orthodox Irani community to end the sacrificing of cows to Anahid; this marks a shift in authority with the Parsi community beginning to take on a leadership role. The sons of Irani priests followed the sons of laymen into the new schools and in ever growing numbers began to forsake their hereditary calling as priests to take up secular careers.

With the many changes within the Bombay community: transformations of ritual ..., differing calendars, debate over the accuracy and authority of texts, adjustments and relaxation of purity laws..., moderate change in women's dress, decreasing ranks of the priesthood, increasing control and decisions by laity, and ongoing debate between orthodox and reformist groups one would perhaps perceive a fracturing community. As well, the Irani community at the beginning of the twentieth century was beginning to see increasing prosperity and one can see the rough outlines of the same trajectory for change as that in the Parsi community. However, the Irani community continued to maintain a strong priesthood authority and largely rural concentrations within Yazd and Kerman with relatively few differences of opinion with the Parsis. Parsis, despite the

changes, still inspired visitors to Bombay with the quiet, communal worship that had been practiced for generations, “with prayer being offered at the appointed times to the Creator in the setting of his own creations...”

(Boyce 2004: pg. 215)

Boyce's concise summation of the evolution of trends in Zoroastrian thought here echo Nigosian's confident statement in 1996 that the Zoroastrian community, despite differences, still is to be considered as a unified community committed to preserving heritage and way of life.

Into the 21st century: Dialogue, Controversy, Revitalization

Zoroastrians today are experiencing a second Diaspora reaching beyond Iran and India to Britain, Canada, the United States, Sri Lanka, Australia and numerous other countries. Some even say a second revolution (Ushta, 2008). Zoroastrians today incorporate the Internet in a dynamic ethnographic narrative of letters, rebuttals, published lectures, researched articles, association news, audio clips, pictures, and sharing of virtual pilgrimages to Iran to link this global Diaspora. Continuing the narrative of online voices, the voices of community members as they are recorded on websites will continue and those of social networking sites as Z-book, Yahoo! groups, and YouTube will be added. It will also rely on written texts of the community in journals, association newsletters and other publications in deference to and to document the understanding that the online community is representative of the discussions and perspectives held in the community.

Contemporary Parsi and Irani communities in the 20th and 21st century, under pressures and social changes from urbanization and technology have undergone changes that have led to diaspora movements, different communities of thought, and the consequent development of current social structures around the world. “Transplantation results in Transformation” (Fenggang and Ebaugh 2001), and the transplantation of Zoroastrians from India and Iran to Europe, North America, Canada, Australia and numerous other countries in a second diasporic wave of beginning in the 50's and 60's set in motion further transformations within the community. As Dastoor asks, “How did we react to this coming together in the diaspora, did we combine our various cultural and social differences to evolve into a new Zarathushti personality or did we

fragment more.” (Dastoor 2005:pg.1). The continued migration of Zoroastrians as related on websites is this story of transformation and history plays an important role as a tool in its crafting and as a standard of comparison and legitimacy in meeting the demands of modernity.

A concerted drive to reclaim heritage and identity has also marked the turn of the century. The need to revitalize the culture and transmit the ethno-religious identity to new generations lacking traditional support systems, and areas such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, once part of the Persian Empire, reclaiming independence are powerful factors in this. Revitalization has resulted in increased visibility which has led to the rise of the neo-Zarathushti identity and unprecedented interest in learning about and becoming part of the community. Limited conversions have thus marked the rise of contemporary Zoroastrianism as well.

There has been a concerted effort on the part of North American Zoroastrians both independently and through FEZANA to build supporting infrastructure to give newly emigrated members and those of the next generation resources. Umbrella associations, organizations, financial assistance for members in need, scholarships, and growing libraries have been utilized. Directories and two census studies by FEZANA are ways that the demographics of North America are being better understood. The umbrella organizations and associations work together to bring lectures on Zoroastrian history and sacred texts to widely dispersed members at community sites such as the California Zoroastrian Association center in Orange County. These organizations also support sports events and international congresses to encourage collective identity. Community centers also strengthen collective and individual identity through language classes and communal observances much as other immigrant religions do (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000). The World Zoroastrian Organization and the Trust Funds of Europe play a strong role in the leadership structure of the global diaspora as well.

Identity Dynamics of Diaspora

Our identity at present can best be described as fluid. We are a community of changing places and faces. We migrate, we grow and we disagree.

(Engineer 1999:pg.41)

Engineer vividly voices the emotional core of being a member of a diaspora. In Chapter II, theory provided a conceptual framework for encapsulating aspects and challenges Zoroastrians face in creating community as members of a diaspora. In the course of following email lists I was made aware of unintended consequences of being part of this religious diaspora. There is a sense of being part of an exile community. Parsis often reflected that conversion of Irani Muslims not only was an issue on general principles against conversion, but also were not to be encouraged or allowed because it would anger the Islamic government of Iran and place the Zoroastrians there in danger of persecution. Members of the email lists also commented at times on the issue of Iranians claiming to be Zoroastrian for the purpose of receiving visas and immigrating. Zoroastrian identity and membership offers persecution or refuge based on context. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these two issues in great detail; however, they offer a needed sense of texture and perspective on the debates of conversion and identity for Zoroastrians and so will be commented on briefly.

As Pocha (Pocha 2003) says, “the full complexity of Iranian identity is little understood and almost never discussed-even by Iranians themselves.” Irani Zoroastrians live on the razor’s edge at times of government approval for the link they offer to the glory of their pre-Islamic heritage and at risk of persecution if the theocracy perceives them as a threat by converting Muslims who wish to reclaim their ancient heritage. “Iran’s other religion” legitimizes Iran’s glory and claim to ancient civilization and so authority in the modern world. Videos on YouTube for example also mention concerns and outrage that Zoroastrians are ‘stealing’ Muslim youth. Zoroastrian temples are sites for tourists and temptations for a dissatisfied populace. One member of a list related the story of how they met a couple in Australia that wore the fravahor and claimed to be Zoroastrian. When pressed, they admitted that they had been Muslim. For this very orthodox woman they represented those who wished to claim an identity that is not theirs for status.

Misuse of conversion is one of the reasons why many Zoroastrians discourage or deny the practice outright. It indicates the strength of ethnicity as a factor in identity. Another member of a group list related a story as an example of such concerns:

"While attending a function at the Daremeher in Southern California ... one Irani Zarathushti told me that there was a money-making racket... some people in Southern California were converting Iranians to the Zarathushti religion so that they can then claim special status such as refugees to gain political asylum and enter the USA. ..suspected by the U.S. authorities, they started tightening the verification rules and are now requiring proof of belonging to the Zarathushti religion (immediate ancestors, etc.).

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

Moreover, conversions are suspect as they do not have the same link to heritage, a sense of the sacrifice of those who gave their lives or risked exile, as a born Zoroastrian does.

...people who convert for material benefits such as immigration, or taking advantage of a community's charities, subsidized housing etc., cannot be relied upon to vote for the community's and religious institution's best interests. Such converts are likely to advocate changing the religion to a form that they are used to or no rules at all.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

As these limited comments illustrate, there is a constant struggle to manage borders to maintain legitimacy in discussions of identity. Who can be allowed in, should anyone be allowed in? For Parsis in particular, since their sense of self was bought for and preserved through the blood and sacrifice of ancestors who left their homeland to settle in India, why should they admit those who can't possibly be genuine coming from the very religious tradition that attempted repeatedly to wipe them out? One respondent passionately stated in a personal communication,

Our religion is not a bargaining chip nor can it be traded in for new like some magic lamp!... and believe it or not, some actually prefer to have Aryan Zoroastrians in their countries rather than Semetic Muslims! So to be accepted they now turn to Zoroastrianism as if that will be their earthly salvation. Ours is not a religion of convenience!

(2008)

As these brief examples show, the dynamics of identity formation are not necessarily limited to the members' choices between competing loyalties and internal sense of who they are. Identity dynamics works to force people in as well as out. The issue facing the community in diaspora is twofold, how do they maintain borders porous enough to allow exchanges of ideas and interactions with the cultures and societies they have transplanted into or that are constantly brushing against demarcations of language, values and norms outlined by religion and ethnicity to

be successful? In turn, how do they keep them impermeable enough to keep those out that would dilute and possibly work to change Zoroastrian identity and keep in those members who would drift away weakening this small group?

Revitalization

the Zoroastrian community consisting of about 130,000 individuals, live in India, Iran and in various parts of the English speaking world. Faced with...the threat of cultural and religious assimilation within the diaspora, some members of the community are meeting the challenge with renewed interest in the study and practice of their religion...

www.ahuramazda.com

This 'renewed interest' has fueled a revitalization of Zoroastrianism and an expanded awareness of this ancient religion even among those outside the community. Several events and a variety of agendas have conspired to increase the visibility of Zoroastrianism: a shrinking population of Parsis and efforts to increase awareness and efforts at cultural preservation much of it well documented online at the UNESCO Parsi Project, UNESCO's declaration of 2003 as the Year of Zoroastrianism, the freedom of previous Soviet states such as Tajikistan and Azerbaijan to pursue their ancestral heritage, the increasing efforts of the Iranian government to draw on Persian history to support and increase interest and nationalistic pride in Iranian heritage, and a strict Muslim theocracy fueling an Iranian Diaspora. This increased awareness has strengthened pride of group membership for a younger generation; it has also created difficulties as pressures for changes in tradition and doctrine increase.

Education of the youth and the community in general has been taken up as a tool to effect this reinvigoration of belief in practice and much of it is aimed at the youth. Khojeste Mistree has been an active proponent of religious education for decades traveling to various parts of the world to speak to youth about the tenets of Zoroastrianism sharing his time in small informal question and answer sessions to engage their interest and strengthen their knowledge from a traditional, ethnic perspective. In the 1980's he established the Arthravan Education trust as a scholarship program to educate young priests once they finish the traditional religious training. Aimed at giving them a broader perspective that teaches ethics, elementary Avesta and the philosophy behind the learned rituals, it also looks to give them a greater dignity and encouragement to

follow their hereditary calling in paying them a stipend to supplement the very minimal wage they earn as priests (Sohrabji 1988). In 2008, with the added responsibilities of a BPP trustee, Mistree continued to stress the need for cultural/religious education at a BPP roundtable discussion on education. Referring to the current issue of the “ ‘identity crises’ that (they) face as a community” (Madon 2008), he spoken on the need to instill a sense of “Parsi Pride” among the youth to find their ‘lost identity’ as both a religious minority and a distinct ethnic group with a rich cultural heritage. Efforts at education also involve youth sports activities and conferences to bring youth and leaders of the community together to watch traditional dances and practice the tenets of the religion while sharing activities that strengthen community bonds. Many of these activities are also announced and coordinated on the Internet to enhance their effectiveness at reaching members around the globe.

Zoroastrian transformation within the Diaspora and the inherent difficulties of immigrant religions re-evaluating religious belief against cultural traditions⁶⁵ is mirrored within the transplantation of the community to the Internet. Online resources form a nexus of much of this revitalization for committed members and the passionate debate over the direction it will take, and as Engineer points out this, “is open to discussion 24 hours a day.” (Engineer 1999:pg.41). It is important to remember that the identity presented is to some degree influenced by its intended audience and the goals of those placing these statements online. Much of what is presented is part of ongoing dialogue intended for internal use as information by Zoroastrians for Zoroastrians. They draw on accomplishments of the community and general outlines of social structure, belief, and practice. In greater contrast are social network(ing) sites such as Z-book and Yahoo! discussion groups. These are more deeply interactive and in the conversations one sees how history, tradition and belief are pushed forward as tools to support individual and larger group convictions of Zoroastrian identity which will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

Online History as Affirmation, as Legitimization

Zoroastrian websites represent a communal history selecting and focus on a few distinct points of history as presented above. These points are prominent in the narrative of the

Zoroastrian identity painted in broad brushstrokes online. As such, they are essential in shaping the living history of Zoroastrians online. This living history is built on Zoroastrianism's status as official religion of the Persian Empire, Cyrus the Great underscoring Zoroastrianism's contribution of what they define as the first human rights document, the influence of Zoroastrianism on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and the deliberate persecution by Muslims in the Arab invasion.

These common points of history are used to impart a sense of pride in Parsi/Irani ethnicity and thus an ethnic identity as a Zoroastrian. This identity has deep roots even beyond recorded history as Boyce (2004) states: "As the numerous Iranian peoples were brought gradually to accept Zoroaster's teachings, they came accordingly to regard these as part of their own racial heritage, to be treasured accordingly, rather than as a universal message of salvation for all mankind." (pg. 47) It bears stating here that this is continued on websites of traditional Zoroastrians. As earlier stated, these historical events emphasize a foundation of Zoroastrianism as the first monotheistic faith established by a man who was set apart from others by his intelligence, teachings and the touch of the divine. Their place in history is as that of a people who held sway over land reaching across central Asia, west toward Rome and Greece, east into India, north into Russia and south into Egypt as the religion of three empires.

Many sites are oriented solely toward the Parsi community and use history to emphasize their contributions to their adopted communities. The WAPIZ site supplies one such example. The MainstreamZoroastrians Yahoo! list provides another example of how role models are presented in discussions to reaffirm the strength and integrity of the community in times of trial and community infighting. On October 20, 2008 during the emotional BPP elections pitting traditional Parsis against those championing liberal reform, to offset the gathering momentum of anger and consternation at the perceived disgraceful display of many running for BPP office that was being voiced online, one poster posted a list of 38 examples of exemplary Parsis. They were industrial leaders, contributed funds for religious infrastructure, and played key roles in government. The poster on the MainstreamZoroastrians list produced over twenty examples which exemplified the work ethic and community integrity of which Parses should be proud. Some were involved in the establishment of the Indian National Congress in shaping the constitution of India, "men like

Dadabhai Navroji, Mancherjee Bhowmagaree, Shapurjee Saklatwala the only Indians who have been hitherto returned to British House of Commons have enhanced the reputation of community by voicing the grievances of Indian people before the British Public.” K.R.P. Shroff was exemplary as the President of the Bombay Stock Exchange, and Dadabhoy Pestonjee Wadia (J.P) was held up as an example for his charity and professional success:

... adopted son of of Pestonji Wadia built bridge at Kim, Fire temple Building of Udvada, Two Agiaries in Mumbai Two in Surat, Dharamsala at Bassein & Pardi. One of the founder member of Bombay Chamber of Commerce, Only Indian appointed to Committee to establish the Bank of Bombay & promoter of Oriental Bank. He was one of the first JUSTICE OF PEACE –appointed in 1834.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2008)

That ethic and integrity have been carried in the Diaspora to England, the United States, Australia and other countries in recent decades (Hinnells 2005). Irani Zoroastrians stand at the other extreme being continually threatened and largely held back from important social positions. Thus, these websites have helped to create a firm foundation for members to take pride in where they come from, the inborn strength of their ethnicity as evidenced in Irani Zoroastrian survival under extreme duress, and Zoroastrian contributions to society which build the basis for communities of affirmation.

¹⁹ Personal communication by Dr. Choksy as well as a variety of comments observed online. It should also be noted that this change has been commented on negatively by members of traditional, orthodox viewpoints such as on MainstreamZoroastrians.

²⁰ Dr. Jamsheed Choksy related this information to the author in 2009 from personal experience traveling in Iran.

²¹ At present, I have not been able to identify any Zoroastrian university student sites.

²² Agre, P. (1998) 'The Internet and Public Discourse', First Monday, URL (consulted 25 June 1998): http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_3/agre

²³ Defined both on and offline as representative of a guardian soul with each part signifying an idea or philosophy. See Mistree, Rivetna, Choksy, Boyce, two internet sites

²⁴ Ancient Iran

²⁵ http://www.californiazoroastriancenter.org/z_identity_en.htm

²⁶ Found at <http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/zor33.html>

²⁷ Found at www.fravahr.org/spip.php?article423

²⁸ <http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/identity33.html>

²⁹ <http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/identity33.html>

³⁰ zoroastrian.org

³¹ ahura.homestead.com

³² <http://blagoverie.org/eng/anjoman/index.phtml>

³³ Dr. Jamsheed Choksy defines a “*paygambar*” as a bearer of holy words. Pg. 5

³⁴ It is my personal sense that youth feel that deciding on how they will define Zoroastrian identity with its inherent issues of conversion and marriage within or outside of the community will then decide the issue of declining population.

³⁵ Accessed 12/16/2004 & 1/9/2009 at http://www.adherents.com/Na/Na_490.html & <http://www.adherents.com/Na/Na-673.html>

³⁶ <http://www.unescoparzor.com/project/demographics.htm>

³⁷ The UNESCO Parsi Project presents statistics based on the Indian government’s 2001 census on population growth rate, age composition, male/female ratio, birth/death rates, population distribution, and fertility. These data paint a picture of a highly urbanized community with a population decline of 8.88% due to low fertility and a large aged segment of the population having immediate ramifications for impacting community and family structures required to support this growing segment. The FEZANA survey gave less attention on factors influencing population growth and more on the actual composition of the population. Factors evaluated included population distribution, marriage, birth and migration, age groups, education, and retirement.

³⁸ Other choices included nearby medical facilities, moderate winter, easy access to shopping, part/full time employment opportunities nearby.

³⁹ These terms were accepted as standard practice by FEZANA at its 1997 Annual General Meeting.

⁴⁰ <http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/namc33.html>

⁴¹ <http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/namc33.html>

⁴² Dr. Choksy, personal communication.

⁴³ <http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/identity33.html>

⁴⁴ <http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/zor33.html> accessed 3/30/2006

⁴⁵ Ahunavaiti Gāthā (Hās 28-34), Ushtavaiti Gāthā (Hās 43-46), Spentamainyu Gāthā (Hās 47-50), Vohukhshathra Gāthā (Hā 51), Vahishtoisti Gāthā (Hā 53)

⁴⁶ There are several other variants: Nou-Rouz

⁴⁷ <http://delhiparsis.com/category/zoroastrianism/>

⁴⁸ Discussions with two respondents on the lists suggest that tradition holds it was purely a verbal agreement.

⁴⁹ http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/WarningARZ_1.html

⁵⁰ <http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/notpres33.html>

⁵¹ <http://www.fravarhr.org/spip?article29> posted 2/2/06, accessed 3/5/08

⁵² When asked about Divyasna, Parviz Varjavand defines it as "In the powers of the Div, one must Believe and have Faith in." where Div and Dey are related to words such as Divine which refers to powers beyond the reach of the Mind. 2-28-2009.

⁵³ Boyce (2004) pg. 2

⁵⁴ In 1935 Iranian officials requested those countries with which it had diplomatic relations to refer to Persia from that point as "Iran". [2008] Yarshater, E. When "Persia" became "Iran". excerpt from "Persia or Iran" published in Iranian Studies, Vol. XXKK, No.1, 1989, http://www.iranchamber.com/geography/articles/persia_became_iran.php, accessed 10-30-2008.

⁵⁵ www.ahuramazda.com

⁵⁶ www.ahuramazda.com, www.zarathushtra.com: According to the Avestas, the sacred texts of the Zoroastrians, Zarathushtra married Havovi and had three sons and three daughters. His first cousin Maidyomah became his first disciple.

⁵⁷ www.ahuramazda.com: Jashan means "important occasion". It invokes the Amesha Spentas and Fravashis and is performed to celebrate important occasions.

⁵⁸ There are three grades of fire and the Fire Temple takes its name from that of the fire within. An Atash Behram houses the highest grade of fire.

⁵⁹ www3.sympatico.ca/zoroastrian: They named it Sanjan after their original homeland in northwest Khorasan.(accessed 11-1-08)

⁶⁰ Fire Temple including the surrounding ritual grounds.

⁶¹ Pocha, J. 2003. "Iran's Other Religion," in *Boston Review*, vol. Summer, pp. 7. online: Boston Review.: Pocha eloquently presents the complexity and uneasy truce of Iranian identity as a monolithic Islamic culture and that of a Zoroastrian pre-Islamic heritage that represents the glory of the Persian Empire.

⁶² <http://www.payvand.com/news/08/dec/1051.html>

⁶³ Boyce (2004): pg. 167, In the thirteenth century, the priests divided Gujarat ecclesiastically into five groups or panths. Each panth had its own council and conducted their own affairs, though the settlement at Sanjan remained the central point of the priestly community with its sacred fire at the Atash Bahram.

⁶⁴ Boyce 2004: Zoroastrian belief holds that the body of the deceased is unclean, and that burial in the earth or cremation would pollute the pure elements of earth and fire. The dead are traditionally placed in Towers of silence where they are exposed to vultures and the sun to quickly

and cleanly dispose of the dead. Urbanization and declining vulture populations have forced the community to make debate, and in some cases, change their manner of funerary rites.

⁶⁵ Ebaugh, H. R., and J. S. Chafetz. 2000. *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations*. New York: AltaMira Press. Fenggang, Y., and H. R. Ebaugh 2001 Transformations in New Immigrant Religions and Their Global Implications. 6-2004, accessed

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS SITE FUNCTIONS AND IMPACTS

Preliminary Survey Results

The survey has received limited responses to date; there are several interesting trends and insights that emerge from even such a small sample size for three of the surveys that I would like to take a moment to mention. Eighteen respondents are divided among the five surveys: Webmaster (3), Non-Zoroastrian (1), 18 & Over (9) and 15-17 (3), 12-14 (0).

The webmaster survey had three active participants. Their responses to question 10 regarding the purpose of the site illustrated some of the expectations of the research. They present a spectrum of the sites found online being from a general website, an association, and a specialty site. In all three cases, communicating correct information about Zoroastrianism as they understand it was paramount – each individual or association thus acting to use their agency in defining Zoroastrian identity online for others to discover. In one case it evolved from a classic development of it being ‘simply appropriate to have on’ to a primary communication conduit with local members which is becoming a growing resource with increasing usage. As seen in another case, it was created specifically to address what the webmaster saw as an urgent problem in the community and is being used to garner support and promote community action.

The results from the user surveys are less clear. Respondents 18 & Over live primarily in the US, half were born in India, are between 60-69, all are well educated professionals, and the majority look to both Iran and India as their ancestral homeland. As would be expected, most were raised in a supporting Zoroastrian household and community and seven of the nine are ‘active’ in their faith. It is interesting to note that both ‘Zoroastrian’ and ‘Zarathushti’ had the strongest support as a term of self reference being chosen almost equally.

All respondents are ‘heavy’ users of the Internet having used it for five or more years with most using it daily. It ranks equally with other media such as television and radio for local,

national and international news, yet only email was ranked strongly as a utilized communication forum. Its bonding effect as measured by responses to question 60 appears to be low. Additionally, 57.1% report using Zoroastrian Internet sites at less than 25% of their total Internet usage. 87.5 percent of respondents use the Internet for news about Zoroastrians, and as indicated by responses to question 68 they appear to generally believe the Internet has been helpful in linking the community. Yet, in answering #79 "I visit/use Zoroastrian websites for:", all responses are in the 'Occasional' category or less. The most perplexing data are the responses to #83 asking them to evaluate a list of 85 websites and the majority indicated that most of these sites were not utilized at all. The suggestion is that there is a strong acceptance of the Internet and its ability to provide information and improve communication among community members, but limited access points are being used. It would appear to be a commentary on the potential value of the Internet, but not yet a strong advocacy. Responses for the two younger age groups are negligible and will need to be evaluated after more data has been collected.

Current Perspectives of the Internet: Value, Tool, Space, or Place

The idea...was to make communicating within the community easier. I'm really blown away by the power of the net.

Ader Gandi (Reporter 2006)

The interest in the Internet as a communication tool is important for a diaspora community seen to be steadily dwindling in numbers. Such was the impact of Zoroastrian sites, that by 1998 those outside the community took note perceiving that, "Zoroastrians were climbing onto cyberspace in an attempt to create virtual communities and preserve their faith." (Allen 1998:pg.1) Allen interviewed one Zoroastrian who elaborated saying it was a way to meet people helping youth 'deal with much of their isolation'.

The first suggestion of meaning and value the Internet holds for Zoroastrians is often found in the stated purposes of the websites and lists themselves. These range from a desire to "represent and protect Zarathushti rights and interests internationally...foster unity and enhance better understanding of the faith, its history, traditions" (w-z-o.org), 'preserve and promote the

Universal Message of Prophet Zarathushtra' (Vohuman.org), preserve and uphold the Parsi Irani Zarthoshti heritage and foster learning to help community live and propagate a Parsi Irani way of life (wapiz.com), and to bring communities closer through social, religious, cultural and sports activities (lazcc.org). An interview of Ader Gandhi (Reporter 2006) offers first hand insight into the aims of one of the webmasters of one of the most popular Zoroastrian sites. Mr. Gandhi currently has established several websites that target specific purposes all aimed at disseminating any information available on the net on Zoroastrians. "I wish to make it clear that I'm not doing this for a religious reason. Making this website was a pleasurable experience, it was culturally enriching." (pg. 1). The Parsi Chronicle (theparsichronicle.com) is a general site 'chronicling Parsi culture on the net' since 2003. Since then, he has developed The Parsi Directory (theparsidirectory.com), The Parsi Match (theparsimatch.com), The Parsi Video (theparsivideo.com), and The Missing Parsi (themissingparisi.com) to provide specialized services. Mr. Gandhi supports these sites completely from personal funds and sees it as his 'way of giving back to the community'.

The two responses from the webmaster survey offer additional firsthand knowledge into the complex purposes that drive website creation. Mr. Gandhi utilized it as a philanthropic expression. The two survey respondents touch on slightly different perspectives. For one, "on one level it is 'simply appropriate to have'" the purpose later changing to make it a 'primary communication method for the whole community'. For the second, it is more than a communication tool that is an extension of the newspaper or other communication avenues in today's technological world. It is a means of correcting misunderstandings and presenting the true identity of the religion, it is "to give a true picture of Zarathushtism in a world where it is the most misunderstood philosophy/religion."

Earlier I stated that, "Context is here defined as the value they perceive in their Internet use, negative and positive impacts of online presence for themselves and the general Zoroastrian community, and perceived possibilities and uses of the Internet." There is not a single, unified evaluation of the Internet and its impact as a social force. Some believe it has ended an isolationism of ethno-religious identity restoring its potential as a 'universal religion:

...with the rise of the Internet as the new leading medium, isolationism as a strategy to cope with anything undesired will not have a future.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2008)

The Parsi mind is a closed mind...I grew up under similar belief being brought up in a Parsi School, until I was free to read and understand for myself. The Internet has made all this possible and when the Internet reaches the Islamic Hordes to read all about the other religions where the Freedom to learn and understand and decide is granted (IJTEHAAD) then those hordes would also make a rush towards the Freedom, which the normal Human Mind craves.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2008)

It seems the arrival of Zoroastrianism on the internet and conversions by non-Iranians and non-Indians are definitely linked.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2008)

These statements reveal the perceived value in the Internet's ability to expand the Zoroastrian religion to others to end what they see as isolationist practices as an ethno-religious identity.

There is also the feeling that it is a tool that allows them to reach out to others to strengthen bonds and create a much wider circle of friends and acquaintances in a social network possible through a global reach of electronic exchanges that is not possible in small, widely dispersed families and communities. This was firmly brought home to me during a brief conversation on Z-book. I had asked one online acquaintance in my growing network there if the Internet had been helpful in meeting other Zarathushtis to which they answered:

Over the last 12-years, the Cyber Space has allowed me to reach over 20,000 Zarathushtis across the globe who I consider a part of my Wisdom Circle for inspirational messages.

(Z-book, 2008)

First, even if one lived in a community of 20,000, one would never be able to establish even a passing acquaintance with more than a few hundred. Additionally, it is not just a group of acquaintances, but that it has become a 'circle' of others creating an avenue for reaching out mostly within the group boundaries either by association or sympathetic interest on an emotional and spiritual level. Others realize a potential in the Internet for using it to reach others who are outside the group to proselytize:

Iran being full of the Shi'ites originally of the Persian Empire's Z stock would be the best to target with the right kind of Websites and e-mail Lists cleverly designed.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

Finally, the potential for harm has also been perceived:

The internet can be used for great evil, if evil people use it for their sordid purposes.

(Havewala)⁶⁶

The internet brought forth differences that were earlier glossed over.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2008)

These differences have become divisive wedges and encouraged what many traditional see as a proliferation of incorrect information that leads to intermarriages, draws away youth, and tears the religion down from within. Within this perspective is the caveat that the Internet may also be used to disseminate correct information, protect the religion, and be used as a means to bring together those with the same beliefs to work together to strengthen their influence in the Zoroastrian community. The World of Traditional Zoroastrianism proudly presents this belief on their homepage:

A Mailing list connected with the Traditional Zoroastrianism Website is in operation since August 1998, called the "Traditional Zarathushtris Mailing List (TZML)". The members of this list are hundreds of born Mazdayasni Zarathushtris who have full faith and pride in the tenets of our ancient religion. This is a place where the religion will be protected on the internet, and not attacked as it is in the unhappy liberal lists. If you honour and cherish the sacred religion you are born in and want to be part of a group that is upholding it's time-honoured beliefs and traditions, you are welcome to join this new FREE mailing list... which is STANDING UP FOR OUR RELIGION ON THE INTERNET AND SHAKING THE IVORY TOWERS OF THE RICH LIBERALS AND INTERMARRIEDS.

(<http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com>)

As one informant also shared with me, the MainstreamZoroastrians list gives, "...us a level playing field that was denied us at several other sites..."⁶⁷ to counter statements by liberal groups.

The lack of a unified evaluation stems directly from how the individual defines their identity within group boundaries. Those identifying with a more liberal identity see the Internet as a liberating and wholly constructive social force. Their view draws on the same sources that inspired early researchers to see the Internet as a revolutionary force that could end offline power hierarchies and restructure social relationships eliminating gender, ethnic, and other boundaries for a utopian 'brave new world'. The final two quotes speak to the historical/traditional Zoroastrian thought which is more ambivalent. They use the Internet to mobilize community support for events and agendas that they see are important for enhancing cultural cohesiveness and maintaining strong ethnic borders of identity. Yet, they also recognize the long reach of the Internet which compromises group borders and core identity by democratizing a myriad of opinions. As one Zarathushti expressed their frustration with the cacophony of voices and perspectives, "...the internet plays its own part in spreading the mayhem instead of containing it!"

The multitude of voices stems in part from a vacuum of recognized leadership on the Internet. There is neither a 'central' site that speaks as an official portal for the global community with a unified voice or even a presentation of all voices with a unifying message. There has been one call for such a site; it remains to be seen if an existing site will be broadened to do so or if a new site will be created. Occasionally one will see posts on the World of Traditional Zoroastrianism that are from a member of the priesthood, and postings by individual leaders in the community but these are event driven. They do not build a consistent, dependable presence for dialogue and 'consultation' on religious matters. One respondent stated emphatically the importance of the lack of real scholars and leaders from the community in conversations either on websites or discussion groups:

It is imperative that you mention the fact of the real scholars not being able to write at any of these sites...Also remember that the every day, ordinary Zoroastrian is not at all au fait with gadgets such as internet/computers and would rather carry on believing in what they have been brought up to rather than wanting to do any research or extra hard learning about a subject that is simply a way of life for them rather than a bone of contention!

(personal communication, 2009)

They go on to stress the unique roll online of Dr. Ichaporia, a well-known Zoroastrian scholar, who moderates his own electronic email group and is an exception. They further believe that many of the high profile Zarathushti leaders are often exceedingly busy with community affairs, and many priests are unwilling to engage in dialogue with laity that would engage in 'loud and unlearned dissent'. Another individual commented in online discussion that most leaders are 'conspicuously absent' from the Zoroastrian Mailing lists echoing earlier comments that

internet communication is seen as something not worth participating in, but which would call for more interactive responses and answering some frank, perhaps, embarrassing questions posed by genuine people outside of a caucus of our leaders, our educated or success driven elite, questions posed by the young and the ordinary.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

There is also the feeling expressed at various times that many are distracted from community affairs with the desire to 'have a good time'. Examples are given online of the atmosphere often at the Atash Behrams as tourist attractions or places to quickly pay respect then move on to local restaurants and events.

Another Zarathushti phrases the ongoing discussions between dissenting views within the community as a 'battle' and points out the much greater degree to which more liberal perspectives have taken advantage of using the Internet to publicize their message.

Many good Z's are "conspicuously absent" from the Internet, Z alias/discussion groups etc., and some remain so on purpose. They are either scared, shy, non-caring or non-involved...or just plain NOT INTERESTED!...A few Parsi Rathesthars...have been fighting this battle for over 10 years. NO ONE JOINED IN ! The Jafarey Cult has millions of dollars, over 15 websites and 20 alais groups...we have 2 ! No one wants to even finance the "Z Matrimonial Site" run by Porush Havewalla. No one gives it even a few measly bucks. He has been carrying on with his own meagre funds !

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

What emerges is a picture of Internet sites valued by those who are passionately committed to preserving and revitalizing their heritage and who use it as an avenue to stay connected and share perceptions and experiences and at times organize responses to events. Others use it in a more concerted, organized effort to spread the message of Zarathushtra from a liberal stance.

What also emerges is a sense of Zoroastrian online resources as being laity driven in content and inspiration from what they see as a lack of communication and/or information for the community.

How then does this insight into Zoroastrian perspectives of value help us understand their use of the Internet? Markham's first sense of the Internet as a tool, space, or place was a valuable way of interpreting some of these varying perspectives. Campbell, Futrell, Polletta, and Haenfeler refine our perspective to give a more nuanced reading of the data. At first glance, the Internet is most often used as a tool to exchange information and as a space to 'congregate' and share values and opinions. Like others (Fernback 1997), my experiences in chat rooms often reminded me of the seventeenth-century salons of Paris where individuals met and discussed current events and philosophies of the day. The following sections take a more detailed look at the categories of resource sites, communities of affirmation, social networking, and transmovement space through specific examples to illustrate ways Zoroastrians utilize the Internet for constructing group cohesion and identity.

Resource Center

All of the various avenues of online communication provide resources; however, websites are specifically designed to provide information and services and are the specific online resources that I refer to in this category. The first image that greets a visitor to a Zoroastrian site is always an image of Zarathushtra (Fig. 6), the fravahor, sometimes both, or a fire burning in an urn. These



Figure 8 Popular image of Zarathushtra

sites of self conscious productions of identity and the design of the site is crucial, like any first impression, in telling the visitor long before they read the first word 'who' they are meeting. In some cases, I have found that it may even indicate whether it is a more orthodox or more liberal site. For example Delavega's site, Zoroastrianism.cc, utilizes a modified fravahor with a 'Zasha' in the center, symbolic of 'restored Zoroastrianism by choice'. The modified fravahor retains the impression of outstretched wings but no longer has the human figure, instead flames from the center top of the image. It is easily recognizable and makes a clear statement. Both the Swedish site and the Zarathushtrian

Assembly, both supportive of conversion and considered reformist/restorationist have images similar with the modified fravahor and flame which quickly conveys the philosophical ideology and identity of the community the site represents. In all but a few cases, as Hinnells' noted in 2005, the websites have a strong alignment with either the traditional/orthodox, more liberal, or reformist/restorationist perspectives reflected in statements of basic tenets of belief. Placed on the first page greeting visitors, the Traditional World of Zoroastrianism covers several points being debated such that there is no mistaking their stance:

** All our Scriptures are sacred, including the Gāthās, Yashts, and the Vendidad. We pray all of them in our Fire temples, before the Sacred Fire, and they have immense spiritual power...*

** All our fire-temples and rituals of the Yasna are sacred and are necessary for the religion...*

** Dakhma-nashini is the only method of corpse-destruction for a Zarathushtri, as enjoined in the Vendidad: this is the destruction of the dead body in the stone-enclosed Dakhma, by the flesh-eating bird or the rays of the Sun...*

** Marrying, Zarathushtri man or woman, to a Zarathushtri only is commanded in our religion in the Vendidad, to preserve the spiritual strength of the Aryan Mazdayasni religion, and the ethnic identity of the Zarathushtri Aryans. For the Zarathushtri, ethnic identity and religion are synonymous...*

** As such, there was no "conversion", because the Aryans of Iran were already Mazdayasnis when Zarathushtra came... Thus, the Zarathushtris do not convert other people, but they rely on MARRIAGE WITHIN and INCREASED CHILD BIRTH to increase their numbers.*

** The observance of the Laws of the Vendidad is an important pillar of the Zarathushtri religion...*

** Faith, and Hope in the coming of the Saoshyant (Saviour) has sustained our religion through the centuries...*

** We firmly believe that when the Saoshyant comes, the final spiritual battle between the forces of good and evil will commence,...made perfect once again, as it was before the onslaught of the evil one. Such is the Frashogad (Frashokereti), the Renovation, brought on by the Will of Ahura Mazda, the Frashogar.*

The World of Traditional Zoroastrianism

Set against a watermarked background of urns of flame, and set below a large image of the prophet Zarathushtra the foundation of identity here is clearly stated: ethno-religious; non-conversion; no-intermarriage; foundational ritual, prayer, and sacred fire and temples; a

Saoshyant; and the final battle and renewal of the world. This contrasts with the Zarathushtra.com site that has only the headline, "Dedicated to promoting the Spiritual Philosophy of Zarathushtra & Zoroastrianism" and is accompanied by flickering urns of flame in each top corner to mark it as a Zoroastrian site (Shahriar 1996). Here the focus is on the spirit of Zarathushtra's message and there is not the flavor of a community making a stand.

In addition to identity, the topic of who exactly uses these sites needs be touched upon briefly. Without a stronger participation in the survey, there are no certainties about users except what can be gleaned from indirect sources. Alexa.com shows the source countries of traffic in many instances, but not gender or age. Organization sites would logically be utilized most often by local community members. The younger age group more readily utilizes the Internet. This is supported in personal communication from several individuals ⁶⁸. It is hoped that the survey will be able to tease out a better understanding of how widespread Zoroastrian site use is among the under 18 age group. If one were to base this specifically on the content of sites, with only two youth sites -one site dedicated to youth at Zpeaker.com and one dedicated to young children at Zoroastrian Kids Corner- and the activity currently seen on the lists, it would have to be concluded that youth form a small number of actual users of specifically Zoroastrian sites and lists.

In the methodology section a table of categories and a brief description of websites has already been mentioned. To gain a deeper understanding of the online culture and the complexity of Zoroastrian perspectives, a few of the sites have been highlighted to show important aspects- some unique, some exemplary of positions and creations of identity, some to illustrate the variety of services offered. Much has already been said about Zoroastrian use of history on sites to build and support presentations of identity. It bears repeating however that they are engaged in a process of building living history. The glory of their past acts as a fire that is carefully tended both on and offline with the same dedication as a sacred fire using it to light a beacon to carry them into the future. This is everywhere apparent in the narration of historical events to document the Diaspora, the contributions of Zoroastrians, and the hardships they have endured as a people. As

part of their identity, it will surface again later directly and indirectly in specific examples of resources to be discussed shortly.

Popular Zoroastrian Sites: Selected Site Biographies

Alexa.com lists the top 42 Zoroastrian sites; on a search January 15, 2009, nineteen of those 42 were sites not directly created or sponsored by Zoroastrian webmasters or organizations but were rather sites such as Adherents.com and Sacred-texts.com that provide encyclopedia style information portals. I believe this is an indication of the strength of the Zoroastrian sites that there is enough traffic that they dominate the rankings over sites that have much wider subject matter and so a much wider appeal and visibility in search engines.

<http://www.bozorgbazgasht.com/> : (est. 2003) Organization of Bozorg Bazgasht (Big Return). Based in Norway, this site is unique in that it is developed and established specifically by Iranian Zartoshti (Zoroastrians) and by newly converted Iranian Zartoshtis in Europe. According to this site, "...70% of Iranian population is under 30 years of age and they are returning to their roots and to ancestor's religion because they feel the empty vacuum of their Persian identity being distracted from an invading ideology." ("About US" 7-21-08). It presents their interpretation of the Zoroastrian faith and philosophy in Parsi, English, Deutsch, and French. It is also unusual in its strong practice of postings of pictures and stories entirely about conversion ceremonies around the world. It also includes photographs and details of those whose navjotes it facilitates. It also utilizes the Yahoo! Groups; their group mazd_yasna: Anjoman Bozorg Dasturan-Moobedan Yazd was created in 2004 and currently has 740 members. It has a developing web sphere of links to other sites that have similar views on conversion. It places the fravahor center of the page with a contrasting green background that draws the eye immediately to it as the page opens. In another facet of identity building, it draws on language as a defining thread and sets a large amount of Persian text beneath the fravahor.

www.avesta.org: (est. 1995) AVESTA Zoroastrian Archives. Linked to 513 other sites. Users come from the following countries: Iran 21.4%, Germany 12.7%, US 12.2%, as well as Austria, Russia, Belgium, Romania. It is ranked second in the top Zoroastrian sites, a supportive

testimony to its impartial presentation of a broad range of cultural and religious information. It is one of the oldest sites and is maintained by Joseph H. Peterson, the first high profile individual to be converted to Zoroastrianism. It is one of the few sites that eschew a strong association with any particular segment of Zoroastrian thought. It is an important site for its sheer wealth of information and was one of the first sites I discovered and used to begin to familiarize myself with the beliefs and practices of the Zoroastrian community. It contains Dhalla's full text, one of the liberal Zoroastrian thinkers of India in the 1800's which I have often seen quoted on the zoroastrianacceptance2 list. It also contains the full texts of the extant Avesta, Pahlavi texts, articles about the style of Pahlavi letter writing, a translation of the Book of the Deeds of Ardashir son of Babag', examples of Avestan and Pahlavi and Old Persian script, a religious timeline, various information on rituals, and resources such as the only Zoroastrian shop I have seen online. This shop offers a wide variety of ritual implements and clothing such as the kusti, sudre, embroidered covers for Khordeh Avesta, and jewelry and items such as ceramic tiles and shirts with the winged fravahor..

www.vohuman.org: (est. 1998) Vohuman. Linked to 158 other sites, it's primary goal is to "promote information on The Good Religion of Prophet Zarathushtra and The Zarathushtrian Heritage". It began as a web journal and has become an online educational institute. Articles cover a range of topics from contemporary Zoroastrian community, cultural events and festivals, Gathic methodology and illustration, historical events and places, theology, to Zoroastrian genocide. This site is valuable for its wide range and scholarly presentations of information, yet while scholarly there is a passion of commitment to the Zoroastrian experience both past and present. It deviates from the standard identity building in that there are none of the traditional Zoroastrian images in keeping with its neutral stance.

www.fezana.org: (est. 2001) Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America. This association functions as an umbrella group for 25 associations in the United States and Canada. It acts purely as an information site for the North American community with no statements of doctrine. It does make a clear statement of identity with the placement of the fravahor in the top left corner. A calendar of events supplies dates for the 6th Zarathushti Unity Soccer Tournament

in September, the XV North American Zoroastrian Congress in 2010, and the 12th Zarathushti Games. An interactive map of associations that supplies contact information is also available. There is also an extensive archive of documents compiled by the association from meetings for community reference.

<http://Zoroastrians.net>: (est. 2007) Zoroastrians.net. Many sites have a fairly tight focus on cultural and religious preservation and some services. This site is unique in its goal to be the largest 'aggregation of Zarathushti/Zoroastrian-Parsi/Irani websites' available online and so is the only site seeking to be a *comprehensive* resource center. It too deviates with no identifying imagery. It is a new site and is neutral in tone. It has a very transparent and easy to navigate list of categories and services which is enlightening to list here:

Table 8 Zoroastrians.net Categories & Services

Calendar	Banks	Books	Business
Directories	Education	Federations/Groups	Food
Forums	Galleries	History	Kids
Matrimonials	Professionals	Navjote	News
Notable Zoroastrians	Names, Surnames	Religion	Rituals & Practices
Shopping	Sports	Travel	Trusts & Funds
Virtual greetings	Wedding	Youth	Arts
Entrepreneurship Program	Agiaries & Atash Behrams		

These sections contain a wealth of community interaction and information for networking and preservation of culture and religion. A striking example is the Entrepreneurship Development Program posted by the World Zarathushti Chamber of Commerce (wzcc.net). The top of the information page is crowned with a seal and the fravahor set in the center. The program is well articulated and aimed solely at developing entrepreneurs within the Zoroastrian community with a residential training program and easily found contact information. A brief look at the "Contact Us" page gives insight into the interactions with a variety of comments on display. On April 4, 2008, there were two postings 'to hire some good Zoroastrian men & women for our company'. Another

comments on the wealth of information on Zoroastrianism on the site and that they intend to forward the site link to all the Parsis in their address book. There is a wealth of news and comments on current events such as the attacks in Mumbai and the upcoming Dubai Zoroastrian conference.

<http://unescoparzor.com/intro.htm>: The UNESCO Parsi Zoroastrian Project (PARZOR). This site is unique in its mission of recording, preserving and making public numerous projects to preserve Parsi cultural history and traditions. The primary goal of the project and site is to 'generate an awareness' and 'create a revival of interest within the community, country and the world'. UNESCO founded the start up costs which PARZOR has continued through private donations. This site documents their preservation and teaching of numerous 'intangible' aspects and traditions in the Parsi community of India from priests, musicians, artists and medical practitioners. These projects range from microfilming the aging manuscripts of historical importance at Meherjirana Library at Navsari; recording and publicizing Tappa -a dying form of Hindustani classical music; documenting Tanka a traditional process of high quality drinking water collection; interviewing elders to collect personal and family histories, photographing and publishing Parsi architecture, festivals and art; to collecting and disseminating information on infertility and methods of reversing this medical condition.

There are a number of other sites that illustrate the diversity and richness of the Zoroastrian online community. WAPIZ was developed to give a voice to and organize the strongly orthodox community, especially the Parsis in India. It is lead by Khojeste Mistree and uses its site to comment on events in the community such as the BPP elections in 2008 and the election of a new trustee in 2009 after the death of one of the newly elected members. ZWIN, the Zarathushti/Zoroastrian Women's International Network, is a global forum that is established specifically for Zarathushti women to, "empower them to reach their full potential, and to actively work towards promoting the exchange of ideas in all relevant social, educational, and community issues." (<http://www.zwin3.net>). There is also a banking site and the Zoroastrian Chamber of Commerce that seeks to establish a forum for professional networking and entrepreneurship. They have sponsored gatherings and programs offering scholarships and training/mentoring

opportunities for Zoroastrians to encourage their development in business. The following selects a few examples from each of the categories outlined as means of affecting identity through the Internet. These miniature case studies will provide a richer look at Zoroastrian usage of online resources and the dialectic between the medium and discussions within the community.

Examples and Case Studies

Resource Sites: Archaeology and Preservation of Material Culture

Heritage preservation touches on the past in a selection of qualities of association and identity that then looks forward in an act of creation of modern identity legitimized with the weight of history. Revitalization then draws on historical accomplishments and then debates the future of community choices in what conveys the essence of varying degrees of transformations of culture and identity. The transformation comes in the selection of items to be posted, what is and is not presented.

Some presentations are in the form of pilgrimages within or back to Iran (Khalili 2009). Some online sites are ethnohistory, some are ethnoarchaeological in nature such as web page The Last Parsis which documents through video documentary the quest of the author to Daund, India in search of ‘crumbling Parsi history’ in ‘aging agiaries’ and other material remains of a once strong Parsi community. Vohuman also has several articles with detailed images of heritage sites of fire temples and other Zoroastrian sites (Antolak 2005, Eslami 2005).

The email lists, in a fashion, also function as resource sites which can become a spark for activating this space as a community of support and affirmation. It is not uncommon when I log in during the week to find YouTube and other links that present Persian culture and history posted. In October on the MainstreamZoroastrians was posted a YouTube link- no explanatory text- only the subject line “A part of our history”. The video is a thirty-two minute presentation of Persian accomplishments. On another morning in February, 2009 I opened a post to find a link to a web site on the ancient Zoroastrian sites in Tajikistan. On yet another morning I was excited to find a link to an article by Dr. Mary Boyce and Firoze Kotwal on the IranShah, the oldest sacred fire in

the Atash Behram in Udvada, India⁶⁹. Each morning has quickly become a treasure trove of information.

I would like to briefly present an example using the current debate over the Udvada Iranshah renovations to illustrate the role of history,, preservation of material culture, and the interlocking nature of online resources and how they are often driven by events to create information centers that can also contribute to bonding among members. One morning in February I noticed a post by Geve Narielwalla to the MainstreamZoroastrians regarding the renovations to the outside of the Atash Behram. His initial post and website clearly illustrate how Internet use is often event driven; the importance of history and 'living' heritage to segments of the Zoroastrian community; the interweaving of online resources; the web of interconnectedness of some Zoroastrian sites; and the use of history, tradition, and archaeology to serve as a foundation and revitalization of identity.

His first post first clearly establishes the specific changes and the importance of the Iransha Atash Behram as the holiest of all places for the Zoroastrian community. While it is important for the site to be maintained, his tone and comments underscore the primary concern as the imitation of iconic symbols in 'shoddy' and 'synthetic' materials so that they look more like props or 'film set' figures that are temporary and to not measure up to the grandeur of the surviving historical figures they are meant to recall. This is something that is elaborated in great detail on his website.

As you would be well aware, our most revered Iranshah Atash Behram has come in for renovation and ornamental Zoroastrian symbols added to the building exterior, a new gate with a pair of guards, and two Guardian Oxen on either side of the building steps.

These are, as most of you certainly know better, in very poor imitation of Zoroastrian iconic symbols and bas reliefs surviving in Persian sites in Iran-... if these are put up, in poor imitation, at some Zoroastrian centre...schools, dharamshalas, even at an agiary which is not a great Zoroastrian icon, etc., this can be considered lightly.

But, here we have the sad occurrence, of this "film set" additions ... on the premises of our most holy of holies, the most sacred, and world renowned Iranshah.

.....I have requested that these garish additions be dismantled, at least redone with better art, in white stone, marble, or bronze, funds permitting

As is readily apparent below, there is also the recognition that a call for the removal of these images will require community support. In response to the event, he built his website <http://udvadarenovation.blogspot.com> to garner support and detail the reasons that the renovations are inappropriate from an aesthetic, religious, and cultural perspective. The site is lavishly illustrated with images of the renovation, those from the Dariush Grand Hotel as an example of how the grandeur of their Persian ancestors represented in Persepolis can be recreated the 'right way.' One tool used to gauge community support is a voting widget at the top of the homepage as well as a section for comments at the bottom of the webpage. Community support is sought from the interconnected links and personal pages and sites of others online; another appeal for support and increase the visibility of the issue is made by posting it to Zoroastrians.net thus reaching an much wider audience more quickly and easily than could be accomplished by mailing letters and word of mouth.

Please visit my blog, especially created, to get Zarathustris to realise what is happening, detailing the issue and providing pictures of the additions, pictures from ancient Iran (and Assyria), pictures of two agiaries where these additions are done correctly, and pictures of how other faiths take such work seriously and go to great lengths to embellish their temples to enhance their dignity and sanctity..

But we all need to get together in such a situation....a lone crusade is useless...

...Is there any way you all can support this sad but fully reversible issue, by inclusion of my blog and your comments in your websites, journals, and refer to my blog, asking your readers to visit the blog and "vote."

Historical accuracy and religious tradition and belief are again presented as evidence for the need to remove or replace the new images. This is supported by images such as Figures 5-8 below.

...the two bulls/oxen, actually Assyrian in origin, but in Zoroastrian tradition represent Gush Urvan, the Soul of the Kine, who cried out for a Saviour in the Gāthās.....and also seen to uphold the world. That is why they are shown as "supporting" any structure, they "support" the columns of the Gate of All Nations, in Persepolisand are likewise depicted at the Cusrow Baug Agiary. At Iranshah these are free standing, in some wrong colour, and many other inaccurate features, inaccurate face....the write up and pictures in my blog clarifies.

In comparing Figures 7 and 8 on his website, he states, "Iranian bas relief are never frontal, that is a Hindu temple art form," to emphasis the departure from authenticity in the renovations.



Figure 10 **Winged Bulls at Persepolis**



Figure 9 **Udvada Entrance Gate Figures**

“Persian features-ancient, noble/royal, arched eyebrows, large luminous eyes, long tapering nose, a well groomed beard, an aristocratic and refined profile!!!”



Figure 11 **Bull head from Persepolis.**



Figure 12 **Free standing bull figure at Udvada entrance.**

“...notice the differences-all features of the face, the style(?) of beard, [looks like an artificial beard, like a wig- only here, a beard stuck to the chin!!!]; - the face, eyebrows, the eyes and nose-[not Persian,] but the profile of a good Parsi face(?)”

Finally, the face of the Zoroastrian community that is presented to the world through these current renovations and they're perceived 'poor reflection' on the spiritual commitment of the community and 'lack of respect' for their beliefs is clearly and emphatically stated.

Artistic decorative embellishments that enhance the sanctity, sacredness and beauty of a place expresses the religious sentiments of a community, but when done cheap, it says the community does not care.

This is further addressed on the website with a comparison with the lavish and extensive manner in which other religions care for their special places of worship. He further calls for a unified community '...as Zoroastrians...as followers of the great Prophet Zarathusht' to solve the issue rather than as 'liberals, traditionalists, gatha-only' segments of a community.

Communities of Affirmation

Recall for a moment that one of the attributes of the web is its compression of space and time. Sharing a pilgrimage to the Shahr Rey Agiyari near Tehran (Khalili 2009) allows one to vicariously visit it with another member of the community creating a sense of *communitas*. When one reads about the success of Lord Karan F. Bilimoria, the first Zoroastrian to enter the House of Lords in Britain in 2006, one shares in the accomplishment as part of a global community (Wadia 2006). YouTube videos of *sofreh* tables and celebrations of Nowrooz in Iran bridge the gap of geography and time so that other Zoroastrians can visit and revisit to share in the celebration as well as share it with others to explain some of their practices and beliefs. This living history can be captured at its brightest moment and then preserved to birth a growing, historical archive. Many of the resources noted above can become used in turn to create communities in a Listserv, on a website, or as will be looked at more closely in a moment on social networks. These communities exist to allow members to share and discuss with others who share their way of practicing Zoroastrianism and where they will be supported in their perspectives. These are communities of affirmation that bind individuals from around the world. Earlier I described the different streams of ideological Zoroastrian philosophy. For the most part, these have websites and lists that are developed by members of these perspectives as noted by Hinnells in 2002 which is still predominantly the case today. The most significant and dramatic impact of this can be seen perhaps on the Yahoo! alias'.

It is instructive to look at a specific case study to see how the threads of use as resource centers and networking converge to create support groups that reach beyond geographical localities. I joined one Yahoo! group list in late August of 2008 and my introduction was to a flurry of activity regarding a code of conduct for the Atash Behrams in India. I watched as individuals quickly identified what they saw as a problem of individuals breaking the sanctity of these houses for worship and the repository for the sacred fire. Sentiment rapidly coalesced around an active protest, individuals sharing their experiences – one a detailed account of the use of cell phones which are prohibited - and members organized the development of posters which were later posted. The dialogue was passionate with several postings almost every day.

On September 2, 2008, two posts were made. One ran the subject tag: “Why are AFP called Altoo Faltoo Parsis”. It was to be the first posting about the historic trustee election to the Bombay Parsi Panchayat, the first in over 300 years and so of great import to the Parsi community. It was a copy of an editorial by WAPIZ which was fielding several candidates that ran in the Parsi Mirror magazine. This served to both provide informational resources as well as a statement that would quickly stir the intense scrutiny and passion of other traditionalists acting as a rallying point within the community. On September 4th, another post made an intense plea to the community regarding the traditional WAPIZ candidates who, “have done more for the Zoroastrian Cause than any others to date”. In a post script, the member urged others to forward the attached message from a personal email to all their Parsi/Irani friends and relatives. September 8th saw eight more posts – the first to post a date, time, and location to meet the WAPIZ candidates, the flurry of responses contained endorsements by respected scholars in the community and pronouncements of support to ‘help preserve, protect and perpetuate, the beliefs of Zoroastrianism against ‘fangled cultic ideas’.

There followed several days of ten or more postings about ‘evil nag devi followers’ or those Parsis who would enter the Atash Behram with images of other religions on their person which originally prompted the call for a code of conduct poster. This sparked intense debate as to why some Parsis chose to practice praying in several traditions. Again, this was rapidly followed by a flurry of emails about the BPP elections questioning the validity of the elections as there

appeared to be duplications of names, calls for candidates to answer questions about stands such as conversion and intermarriage. With each post members reinforced their identity as Parsis with strong beliefs in tradition and heritage, supported individuals such as a young Zoroastrian reporter who wrote a supportive article on one of the WAPIZ candidates, and urged each other to “preserve, practice and perpetuate’ the religion of their forefathers through voting and encouraging others to vote traditional. Posts continued with one individual from the United States encouraging members to vote for traditional candidates and support the religion after sharing that they had been following the discussions with their parents.

Descriptions of the elections followed as well as announcements of the results and then emails of letters and complaints against the running of the elections and charges of misconduct with subject lines such as “Scuffle, charges of rigging mar Parsi punchayet polls”. The interlacing of different avenues of online communication is again evidenced in this particular posting in October, 2008. Links to articles and at one point video of the election were continually posted; in this particular October post text of a Facebook page conversation about the election was posted as evidence of the low moral character of several individuals. The father of one of them was said to be responsible for accosting Khojeste Mistree’s daughter, Tashan, while she was filming the elections. The entwining of online resources further enriched the online discussions with blogs posted on Parsi-Link at Blogspot.com by Shernaaz Engineer and a further link from her blog page to Zoroastrians.net and an online voting mechanism. Using this constant stream of information and news article links I was able to follow the election, the key questions, and watch the members pull together in support of each other.

There is one last example of community building that I would like to share. Among the numerous discussions of theology, philology of Zoroastrian terms from the Gāthās, and posts of information, on member posted a request for information on the Gahmbars and accompanied it with a description of their own practice of the sofreh table set for Norouz. After a brief response and discussion between this member and myself, Mobed Mehran cross posted a contribution of several pictures using his personal practice as an example to share since I had mentioned I had never seen a sofreh table. It was one of those field experiences that impacts one with the

richness of another culture and the warmth of a shared humanity that offers to invite you into another's home, even if it is virtual. The images he posted and the exchanges between members illustrate the ability of the lists to develop a feeling of community and identity among its members.

Social Networking Sites

Orkut was referred to me by a member of Z-book on my first visit there. After exchanging several minutes of conversation about India and the United States and interests in music and sports, they mentioned that they kept in touch with many other Zarathushtis online through this site. Our conversation was periodically shared by another Z-book member in the public chat room as well creating a comfortable social exchange.

I promptly visited Orkut and created my own profile there to see how extensive the community was. I was astounded at the number and variety of groups (29) that were specifically for Zoroastrians and quickly found myself immersed for about two to three hours browsing from group to group and from profile to profile through the lattice of social networks represented by friend's lists and group membership. I sent ten membership requests to Zoroastrian groups, however, I only received one acceptance from 'Zoroastrian Ceremonies and Myths'. My initial interpretation of this is that this stems from my underdeveloped profile and the clear indication that I am myself Zoroastrian.⁷⁰

The system allows one to search for others by geographic region. There is no Fire Temple or community center in Las Vegas, so I did not expect very many individuals to meet the search criteria of 'Zoroastrian' and 'Las Vegas'. I assumed because there appeared to be no formal community network that there would be few Zoroastrians living here. The results, however, was 90 profiles of individuals who claim Zoroastrian membership. It is a site that needs a more in depth evaluation to understand the Zoroastrian community represented there. Many of the 90 appeared to also be Brazilian; the group that has established itself there is affiliated with Jafarey's Zarathustrian Assembly. This may be why there is a lack of formal community structure since, unlike the traditional community, they would not have as significant a need for a space set aside for ritual and religious observances. A brief note, the Mainstream Zoroastrians list is very opposed to the Zoroastrian community as it is established there since, according to several

postings, they follow a homosexual lifestyle that is not acceptable to traditional interpretation of the sacred texts. This is also another point of contention between some traditionalists and the Zarathustrian Assembly as they feel that the Assembly has misled the Brazilians in the interest of making money through membership and conversion.

The Kuwait Zoroastrian Association is set up as an information website in many respects with its emphasis on creating a database of information about Zoroastrians, but each member must register and is given a profile page which provides the tools to make it a social networking site. It is relatively new and still building a database of information. My introduction to the webmaster and the site illustrates the interweaving of Zoroastrian use of various Internet tools. Nazneen, the webmaster, sent me an invitation on the Mainstream Zoroastrians list soon after I began posting there. I accepted her invitation and established a general, working profile that described my interests and the study I was doing. Word has spread quickly, and I have watched the list of members grow and have had the pleasure of seeing another MainstreamZoroastrians member that I correspond with add a profile. It is the excitement of having a neighbor you know, and with the expanded features of such a site over a list, one is able to 'put a face to a name' with profile pictures. There have been a minimal number of discussion threads at this point on the site. It has the unique flavor of an Association site with their history, activities, and goals stated while having the potential to be a hub of local and expanded, global interaction using the video/image sharing functions and discussion capabilities.

YouTube is a multilayered site. At the surface layer, if one restricts their experience of YouTube to just looking at videos, the social networking value of the site is not readily apparent. It functions in this way very much like a website as a resource center for individuals to peruse items of interest as a type of visual and audio encyclopedia. I was able to thus gain 'windows' into what others thought of as Zoroastrian identity and culture through presentations of history, entertainment and various other topics. Presentations are thus varied, and without knowledge of the poster, it is without certain contextual frames that would lend them more meaning. On a deeper layer, the profiles available to members provides the same social networking functionality as MySpace or Facebook for example.

Visitors search and arrange their search by view count, by post date, relevance, and ratings (popularity) to browse and discover videos posted by members that fit their interests. Searching by 'zoroastrian' and sorting by view count, "Fereydoun Farokhzad with Sepideh, Ahmad & Alice" was listed first with 104,415 views over the year since it had posted. It is an entertainment category and is a video of guest singers. It is interesting to note briefly the flavor of general interest and information posted about Zoroastrians and a sense of identity presented this way. Lange (2008) extensively the large community of members that are heavy users of YouTube, at one point exemplified by conversation posted via videos about a YouTube nation with a 'national anthem' and other aspects of social capital building a network of friends and community. To do more than view, I discovered that one had to register at which point I was presented with my own profile. A quick perusal revealed an extensive network of profiles with friend networks and lavish attention to developing identities with lush graphics and detailed descriptions of personal interests, activities, and philosophies. It's breadth and complexity made extensive research at this time outside the scope of an exploratory study; however, one video exemplifies some of the themes of Zoroastrianism's ambiguous status as a national, cultural heritage to be revered and protected while at the same time held at arm's length by Iranian Islam as Iran's 'second religion'. "Zoroastrian Worship-Iran" was taken November 1999 and uploaded January 2, 2008 to YouTube. As of April it had received over 21,800 views. It clearly attributes Zoroastrianism's survival to being part of Iranian heritage and the strong draw Zoroastrian sites have for tourists (Journeymanpictures 1999) .

Z-book is a social networking site developed on the Ning platform on par with Facebook and MySpace. Two years of personal experience 'living' and socializing in the online poetry community and observing MySpace as a social scientist created a sense of comfortableness with the environment. Again the interlocking web of communication and community on the Internet is illustrated in how I found this site. It is an invitation only site, and I was extended an invitation soon after I posted an introduction and request for information on the lists by a member who included a note that they felt I would find a wealth of information. I quickly found that I felt in many ways that I had stepped into a distinct community and was reticent to begin participating as a

stranger *and* a non-Zoroastrian. I was greeted on the homepage with the magnificent photograph of a fravahor with its wings outspread crowning the top of the page. My first few hours on the site was spent developing a profile that explained my background and interest in understanding Zoroastrian use of the Internet. I also had the opportunity to chat with a couple of members in the public chat room for over an hour about music, books, things that we do for fun such as various sports and general information about professions. At the time of this writing I have fourteen 'friends', most who have introduced themselves to me. The virtual world seems limitless, yet two are individuals I have met on lists, one is the creator of the Kuwait Zoroastrian Association, and one a webmaster of a website that I discovered early in my search of the Internet. They come from a fairly representative set of areas that the Zoroastrian Diaspora has settled in: Gujarat, the UK, Mumbai, the US, Canada, Kuwait, and Kerman in Iran.

There are 95 groups covering a range of interests from "Bollywood Beat", "Bawai Bikers", "Parenting", "Film Club", "Travel and Tourism", "Eating Out", "Dream Cars", "IT Professionals", "Love and Relationships", business, and associations such as the Kuwait Zoroastrian Association and FEZANA. One of the significant features of this site is the large number of discussion threads. The threads often deal with the same community debates that are seen on websites and email lists. Some of them have one or two replies, some of them 40 or more. They cover a variety of topics from the purpose of tradition, a cyber corner for prayer, tattoos, discussions on unification of the community, and the need to wash before entering the sacred premise of the Atash Behram. Topics include:

- Why Can't We Agree To Unify
- One More Cause Celebre For The Traditionalists
- Do We Care About Non-Parsi Zoroastrians?
- When tradition is maintained for tradition's sake
- How Do You Decide Who To Marry
- My Kitchen Secrets
- A Glimpse Of Our Sacred Heritage Sites

The wide variety of topics and groups points to the variety of individuals' concerns, interests, and means of reaching out to connect with other Zoroastrians. In setting up one's profile, one question

is why you are interested in joining the site. It is not an open ended response box, but a list of specific reasons: Keep in touch with friends, meet other Zarathushtis, looking for love, get involved, and all of the above. These are clearly targeted options that reflect the goal of the site in specifically connecting Zoroastrians. Postings on the discussion boards are sometimes very heated with a strong sense of both very orthodox and very liberal viewpoints. Like the websites, this is a communal site that does not rely on scholars actively debating even though the debates are often over doctrine. But they seek to engage the community often in sharing personal perspectives and reasons for those perspectives. There is such a wealth of information that future research will have to be done to present a more in depth, balanced understanding of how the community is interacting.

Again, a brief overview of another aspect of the interaction between online resources is applicable here. In the course of the study, I occasionally posted information on stories and links that were pertinent to conversations as a way of interacting online much the same way that one might interact on a daily basis living at a physical field site. This contributed to a sense of reciprocity and allowed me to gain feedback on websites and occasionally events. Posting the Z-book link fueled a series of emotionally charged posts from several members of one Yahoo! group as well as a letter from the owner of the Z-book site illustrating community interaction both within the site and between sites. Very orthodox members immediately posted to tell me that it was, "...a very Ultra-Liberal site that allows gays, transsexuals, and others deviants to bash and rail against the Zoroastrian religion, it's scriptures, its rituals and its priests." (Yahoo! Groups, 2009) They stressed that 'Traditionals' views were not tolerated and members that spoke out against what they saw as, 'wrongful advertising of deviancy and Pure Evil.' There was a distinct sense that this site, like others are both religious and community sites and that the two are not separable. A Z-book member responded on the email list by focusing on the ability of freedom of respectful expression:

We are a community of diversified minded people. Where an open dialog is necessary as long as people address the issues without attacking others simply because their views do not match.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

Another email list member whom I had rarely seen post before posted a long email from another individual from a different email list. They focused strongly on the administrators non-Zoroastrian status which meant that, 'they will not know what is religiously right or wrong'. In one statement the conflict that had surfaced on Z-book was specifically framed as a battle between reformist and traditional individuals: "...fighting for the religion as traditionalists where there was a lot of opposition and ridicule from the reformists." (Yahoo! Groups, 2009) They continued stating that one member was 'banned' for 'writing in favor of Orthodoxy'. An earlier poster replied with thanks for 'standing up like a GOOD Z'. Yet another posted refining the orthodox position and responding to an earlier statement that the social site allowed respectful freedom of expression thus:

Respectfully disagreeing is one thing and sheer outrageously running down one's parents, one's religion of birth and its time tested traditions and culture and encouraging callow Youth to do so as well, is quite another.

(Yahoo! Groups, 2009)

Two more posts followed these rapid exchanges over the two day period from February 1st through the 2nd. One was posted from another email list that appeared to be having similar debates that I was not a member of. (Again one sees the interlocking lines of communication between groups in support of each others perspectives.) One of the administrators posted a long letter clarifying policies and extending their apologies. It was stressed that Z-book 'has no political affiliations or agendas' being neither traditional or reformist. Rather, its primary objective, as stated on the home page is 'to shorten physical distances amongst Zoroastrians.' Much of the posts charged that traditional members had been banned for speaking in defense of the religion; it is interesting to note here that the administrator supported their position by stating that out of 2300 members, they have had the 'sad duty' of only banning 3, a rather small number. The power of community creation is shifted from that of the administrators as individuals who are to police the site back to the actual community members making them responsible for the content which is generated by members, not administrators. It is reminiscent of a similar process described by Turkle (1984) in a similar situation in a Multi User Dungeon similar to that explored as well by Markham (1998). As quickly as the debate surfaced and rippled outward, it ceased. This is often

the case on the email lists where there is strong reaction to a particular post which evolves into a different discussion. This particular incident is one that hints at how members use different platforms and why they use them.

Transmovement Spaces

There are two levels of events that draw people together that arise from the Internet. The first are general announcements of local meetings, classes, and community events, or as a way for individuals and family members to stay in touch and share information until they can meet again. The second level reaches a much wider, global community and includes those events such as the upcoming 9th World Zoroastrian Congress in Dubai. These are aimed at drawing the whole community together to work for a common vision. There are some calls for action such as that for a World Zoroastrian Body. These uses of the Internet become exchanges of disagreements and calls both in opposition and in support among those who are online and a call for those online to reach out to other members who may not be online to enlist their support. There is a hint of a third current which approaches being social activism. One example is the call from some segments to reach out to the world and share the message of Zarathushtra with a missionary fervor. Another is the call to the community to stand united and be an example to the non-Zoroastrian national and international community with regards to violations of human rights. Briefly I will give a few examples of both the first and second and then delve more deeply into this final issue which may be a window into future Zoroastrian identity.

The Internet, at its most basic level, is a way for individuals to share information. Zoroastrian Associations use their sites to publish meetings, classes, and community events as a way to draw people together. A brief list of events alone illustrates the variety and usefulness of the Internet to draw Zoroastrians together: a cooking demo, English poetry and prose competition, a concert to celebrate the 90th Anniversary of the Mama School, announcements for the Dubai Congress in 2009, a youth swimming championship. An interesting development was the use of an online poll for the election of the Bombay Parsee Panchayet in 2008. Shernaaz Engineer's site, parsi-link.blogspot.com, announced this first for the community publishing the url at <http://zoroastrians.net/bpp-elections/>. Posted on October 17, 2008, it asked, "What is your opinion

on the BPP Election Drama?"; out of a total of 156 votes, 134 answered 'despicable and unwarranted'. Only 10 votes were for 'enjoyable and entertaining, and 12 votes for 'tolerable'. This seemed to reflect the tone of discussion found frequently on the MainstreamZoroastrians site. The majority of postings felt 'disgust' and disappointment at the public displays of political maneuverings and accusations of greed by the liberal candidates.

The final level to be looked at is the least obvious and most complex and perhaps far reaching. The call by Zoroastrians to reach out to others and build a growing community through large scale conversion is a minority opinion, and some would argue a non-Zoroastrian splinter faction. This is because of its relatively 'new' appearance and the group's long historical identity as an ethno-religious group. The large majority are focused within on community development or simply on living the religious precepts with commitment.

Calls to the stage of world action are rare. The recent posting on Ushta that follows is striking in its strength of conviction and as a true request for the community to be an example. The letter is anonymous which for many on the traditional site where it was later also posted is an issue to be discussed shortly. The author of the letter requests understanding of anonymity through fear of reprisal underscoring the great injustice that this letter is a call to rise against:

We as a community who are supposed to practice the tenets of "Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds," "Humata, Hukhta, Huvarshta," should rise as one to prevail upon our religious leaders to relocate the 9th World Zoroastrian Congress Dubai 2009 from this city. I appeal to all members of the Mumbai Parsi Panchayat, FEZANA (Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America, World Zoroastrian Organization (WZO) and indeed all other Zoroastrian organisations and councils world-wide to unite as one, as it is not too late. The 9th World Zoroastrian Congress should not be held in Dubai, as this alone would serve as a wake-up call to the Dubai Government, that there is a small yet significant community in the world, which is aware and opposed to the atrocities being perpetrated in Dubai. We should as a community, which is peace-loving and amiable assert ourselves, and stand up against what is happening in Dubai.

(2009)

This statement encapsulates many features of a call to social activism. It speaks to the core group identity and ethics by invoking the basic Zoroastrian creed of Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds. Here we see a call to 'rise as one' to act at a community level and convince 'religious' leaders to move the upcoming 9th Congress. Note also that it invokes specifically

'religious' leaders and so speaks to the ethical and moral aspect of identity rather than cultural. It also targets several organizations by name such as FEZANA and the Mumbai Parsi Panchayat. At the next level of intensity, the author then urges readers to see this as a 'wake-up call' to a foreign government as a public statement and accusation against the 'atrocities' earlier defined as slave labor, pornography, repressive government action against freedom of speech, and actively practiced racism and discrimination. All of these behaviors not only go against the basic Zoroastrian creed, but describe what the author sees as criminal behavior and actively responsible as well for the death of his wife. He shares personal experience and uses this personal impact to expand it to suggest that the group will also experience the same emotional distress and injustice if they gather in Dubai. At the very least, he suggests that they would be indirectly contributing and supporting such behavior by bringing the conference there. Finally, he stresses again the need for the Zoroastrian community to 'assert ourselves' and 'stand up' against corrupt events and a corrupt government as a 'peace-loving and amiable' group.

This letter also appeared later in the day on the MainstreamZoroastrians list, though posted by a different individual. The two postings varied in key ways. The Ushta posting was by a mobed as support for his own calls for the relocation of the conference. This mobed stresses that there have been few who seem to be concerned; this letter is a means of exemplifying his points, to call others to live the religion, not just give it lip service but to put Good Thoughts into Good Words and so into Good Deeds. In contrast, the posting on the MainstreamZoroastrians was more conservative and posted as an "FYI" for members to be informed and act on as they deem appropriate. Over the course of the next few days there were several posts that quickly pointed out the author's anonymity as a reason to suspect the request as a means of moving the site to favor another groups within the global community. Members quickly cautioned that to withdraw from Dubai was to place Zoroastrians in Iran and other areas who did not have the protection or favor of the Islamic government at risk for retaliation. The BPP posted a letter within a few days to state their official position to members of several email lists which the trustees have given permission to be reprinted in full below:

Date: 2/13/2009 6:30:21 PM

Subject: Demand for Relocation of the Dubai Congress must be Withdrawn

Dear All,

It has been brought to the notice of the Board of Trustees of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet that an on-line petition titled "Ban Dubai!! I have signed" is being sent to members of the community with a demand to relocate the forthcoming 9th World Zoroastrian Congress 2009 to be held in Dubai organized by a group of Dubai based Zoroastrians.

The on-line petition is supported by an anonymous letter and an email sent by Mr. Kamran Jamshidi who has declared his opposition to holding the congress in Dubai in support of the demand made by the author of the anonymous email.

At the very outset, we would like to convey our deep sympathy and sorrow at the untimely death of the wife of the author of this anonymous email. However his fury being directed at Dubai for the same is unnecessary and needless. We have been to Dubai a number of times and it is one of the freest emirates in the Middle East. Alleged labour malpractices in Dubai is no different from what transpires in India or Mumbai. Hence his criticism is most unwarranted.

However as Trustees of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet, we would like to categorically state that letters such as this, castigating sovereign countries, which host small Parsi Irani Zoroastrian communities, has the possibility of placing our community members in danger. Over the decades Parsis and Iranis have lived in the Middle East and elsewhere as loyal residents wherever they have lived, contributing to the economic well-being of their host country.

As the apex body of the Parsi/Irani Zoroastrians in India, we believe it is our duty to safeguard the well-being of our community members presently living in the Middle East and therefore we are concerned and disturbed by the tone and content of the letter circulated by the anonymous mailer as well as by the endorsement given by Mr. Kamran Jamshidi, who now lives in Europe.

The well-being of the Parsi Irani community living in the Middle East is of paramount importance and should not be jeopardized by an individual's experience. The interests of the community at large must be safeguarded. It is imperative that we as a community clearly understand that as economic migrants, if one chooses to live abroad, one has to conform to the rules, regulations and the correct way of life of the host nation. Our miniscule community, with no significant political clout, will be in danger of being singled out, if letters such as these are given currency.

Unfortunately Mr. Jamshidi by his endorsement of this plea of boycott has jeopardized the neutral image of the Zoroastrian community by bringing it in conflict with the people of different religions in the host cultures where our people live.

As the trustees of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet, we would like to condemn and disassociate ourselves and the community from this act.

In addition we would like to state, that these are dangerous times we live in and ordinary Muslims who have never bothered with us because of our carefully constructed image and policy of no conversions over the centuries, may make the community to be viewed as an “anti Islamic target” because of the activities of people like Mr. Kamran Jamshidi who have been active in converting Muslims of Iranians origin to Zoroastrians. As trustees of the BPP we unequivocally condemn such practices which both endanger our people and are seen as irreligious acts not in keeping with the traditional beliefs and practices of the Zoroastrian faith.

As trustees of Bombay Parsi Punchayet, we fully support the holding of the Congress at Dubai and we reiterate that the relocation call is absolutely unjustified and should be resisted at all cost.

We would like the 9th World Zoroastrian Congress to be a successful one with participants visiting Dubai from all over the world and would like to emphasize that the 9th World Zoroastrian Congress must and will take place in Dubai.

(Dinshaw Mehta) Chairman

Bombay Parsi Punchayet

(MainstreamZoroastrians, 2-14-2009)

Several points stand out. First is the concern at members, “castigating sovereign countries, which host small Parsi Irani Zoroastrian communities, has the possibility of placing our community members in danger.” Here again is concern that the actions of one group of the Zoroastrian diaspora could negatively impact members in the homeland. Further reason is given of the good of the community over that of an individual placing the importance of the collective identity and group is more important than that of the individual. Reference is made to, “carefully constructed image and policy of no conversions over the centuries” drawing attention to concerted efforts to construct identity for the good of the group.

It is significant and in keeping with Zoroastrian ethics and doctrine that the letter posted on both Ushta and MainstreamZoroastrians stresses the path of non-violent resistance. It seems a logical extension of the Zoroastrian creed to live a righteous life by example and in awareness of the misfortunes of others and a sense of social responsibility that we see reflected in the numerous charities and assistance funds established by Zoroastrians. I will propose here that this may be an indication of future acts of segments of the Zoroastrian community. To date, much of the community's energies have been focused on group preservation. If they come to feel more secure and empowered, it is likely that their strong belief in living a life that promotes a strong and

ethical social order will lead them to begin looking outside their group boundaries in a much more active role.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Zoroastrians on the Internet: Quiet Social Movement

Religious practice can serve as an avenue for the human spirit to define itself as part of a larger whole among others, among the universe, and imparts a sense of individual identity. At times, religious beliefs can galvanize groups creating a social movement that attempts to transform their surrounding society and sometimes that of other societies around them. Fundamentalist movements have pushed themselves to the forefront of the news and in all aspects of life (Armstrong 2001, Gold 1994, Juergensmeyer 2001). Religion, whether we wish it or not, is a defining global force shaping world events and impacting lives and political policies.

For Zoroastrians, manifestations of communities of affirmation, social networking spaces, resource centers, and creation of transmovement spaces to build opportunities for face to face contact are arenas that sculpt a virtual landscape where a quiet social movement is steadily shifting the contours of identity, and at times, seeking to expand group boundaries. It is one of words and meetings and email dialogues to mobilize opinion and generate articulate, written protests against various issues.

Never before has Zarathushti expression been soon display than through the Zarathushti e-mail alias...and web sites that provide a forum for the thought and feeling of the day. Email after email travel through cyberspace and into our homes and offices, where extremists from the right and left do battle almost daily

(Engineer 1999:pg.41)

Quiet it may be in contrast to other religions and ethnicities whose discussions of survival spill over their social and geographical boundaries into acts of sectarian violence (Armstrong 2001, Juergensmeyer 2001). But as Engineer suggests, in the often volatile communications online it is a 'battle ground' of opposing viewpoints. Nigosian (1996) described the liberal perspectives of segments of the community as a movement, one that still left a global community intact. The

expansion of boundaries being seen online now has created perspectives that are not accepted and is creating widening gaps between differing perspectives while conversely working to strengthen ties within perspectives. Thus there are two movements in essence. One is a movement for revitalizing the vibrancy and dedication of members against the fragmenting and assimilation forces of diaspora and modernity. As such, it is aimed at internal changes and strengthening collective identity and tightening group borders. The other movement is focused within the community for change and diversity of practice and ideology which may at times also be directed outward aimed at making Zoroastrianism a more widely recognized belief. As such, it weakens group boundaries and pushes for a wider, more inclusive definition of collective identity. In more extreme cases, it is also directed outward in an attempt to include those outside group boundaries and bring them inside – to share Zoroastrianism as a universal religion with a message of hope and insight for the world.

The Zoroastrian community I observed in this study, this social manifestation online, is different from other online religious groups and a brief comparison offers further insight into the motivations and mindset of Zoroastrians in the virtual world. Zoroastrianism is a 'quiet' social movement not only because it uses words rather than actual physical confrontation to push forward change and diversity. It historically has not used the Internet to proselytize and 'sell' its perspective to gain converts. It does not yet use the Internet for online services and fellowshiping. It does not reproduce rituals to be replayed online as a way of participation in the religion. It has been focused within itself to redefine itself in the face of declining population and a recent influx of individuals who wish to be included. This is very much unlike other sites that actively attempt to bring in converts, actively attempt to spread their view of the world as a fundamental philosophical perspective.

One final thought on the online Zoroastrian community as a 'quiet' social movement - there have been several calls online to mobilize public opinion using the Internet to effect social change. As was discussed above in the presentation of the Internet's transmovement effect, many of these calls are aimed at changes that seem small relative to the scale of national or international social change for they are aimed at a specific item such as lobbying the film maker

of the movie Alexander to remove the fravahor image. Bold statements to move the 9th World Zoroastrian Congress from Dubai is a much wider and stronger call not only for consequential meetings between members planning the conference to discuss and perhaps move the conference, but also for a social activism beyond their group boundaries. In this light Zoroastrians are presented with an opportunity for a social movement that could initiate an international call for social change. It is 'quiet' in its call for peaceful methods of demonstration using words and 'non-action'. It does not call for boycotts or lobbying of world leaders, simple a worded statement of a change of venue because of a government's repeated violations of what this community holds as core values. To not hold the conference in Dubai is to withhold money and supportive public relations. It is a public announcement of non-support by a well respected community. Like Rosa Parks' refusal to sit at the back of the bus, it is an action that may well call attention to injustice and spark others to act. In truth, it is the quietest yet firmest statement possible.

Implications for Zoroastrian Community

Dolly Dastoor, former President of FEZANA and current editor for the FEZANA journal summarizes the impact of forces for community integration and unity as well as fragmentation as a result of the Internet:

...this cyber community has grown into a virtual nation...For Zarathushtis, the Internet has been a boon, melting away 1,300 years of anxiety and separation and joining us into a single virtual but very tangible community...But this growing cyber community has its downside as well...becoming polarized...The enormous amount of information produced is available on different Zarathushti websites, but its authenticity is often in doubt.

(Dastoor 2005:pg3-4)

I argue that there are far greater reaching impacts on the global community than simply a polarization of existing differences as time passes and the Internet becomes even more entrenched in daily life. The strength of a 'virtual nation' can cement group cohesion and sets the idea of global Zoroastrian identity on par with nationalism. In this case, it is a force that exceeds the nationalism of small groups or individuals to forge a bond across nations uniting the Zoroastrian Diaspora. The at times conflicting messages and questionable authenticity

underscores the latitude for individuals to forge differing self-identities within the group. It is not clear yet how deeply the dialectic between these two forces will affect the community as a whole, though there are indications of how factors of cohesion and fragmentation are shaping the face of Zoroastrianism in the ways the differing schools of thought are defining themselves against one another. There are generational differences as well to consider, and the possibilities are foreshadowed perhaps in the controversial debates on Z-book and lists over statements of a younger generation criticizing religious dictates and pursuing alternate lifestyles while still holding onto the Zoroastrian identity.

I would propose looking at the Internet as another phase of the Zoroastrian Diaspora. If transplantation leads to transformation as Yang and Embaugh suggest and the Internet is a 'space of belonging' (Fernback 1997), then the shifts and transformations seen online are part of the progression of how immigrant religions adjust identity. Technology, far from being a homogenizing force as Barber insists, becomes a means of controlling to some degree the changes within communities. The ability to create bonds of shared commitment to a way of life allow the Zoroastrian community, and other diasporas, a means of shaping that which would shape them.

An Online Case Study and Contributions: Foundations Revisited

Finally, this was also a study to examine the methodological validity and value in using the Internet as a window of insight into a variety of anthropological concerns such as ethno-religious identity, adaptability in Diaspora groups and immigrant religion. It was taken as a foundational premise that online communities do exist and that the Internet is a viable field site, thus this study never presumed to propose innovative methods of Internet research or prove the validity and merit of Internet research. The refinement of qualitative methods with new media, and the Internet in particular, has a rich and growing history as Jankowski and van Selm (2008) have pointed out. Innovation, the production of new knowledge, is seen by them as operating on three levels: macro, mezzo, and micro (Jankowski and van Selm 2008). This study operates primarily on the

micro level as a case study and as an added voice to others who see the value in Internet based research and the value and rich complexity of virtual communities

On the micro level of qualitative research innovation then, could the rapidly developing field of virtual ethnography be used as a primary data source yielding an understanding of Zoroastrian inter- and intra-group dynamics with enough nuances to establish a working relationship with the community? Could enough of the social structure offline be discerned to infer the impact of the Internet on the Zoroastrian community? Lastly, what of the final premise that the Internet would prove to be a unifying and supporting influence on the global Zoroastrian community?

This research was entered into with the belief that it would validate the Internet with its far reaching communication capabilities as a vehicle for building global Zoroastrian community cohesion. It was intended to build as well on Hinnells' diaspora work by examining the impact of the Internet on the second Diaspora from Iran and India and to document what I will call the third Diaspora into virtual space. It was a humbling experience to realize that this was only partially true. The reality, as in social interactions in the physical world, is messy and complex, and perhaps this factor more than anything supports the metaphor of online society as a living, breathing entity with a pulse and blood that flows through electronic veins and bleeds from debates and conflict just as easily. This has implications as well for other diasporas and communities in general in the migration to a virtual world. The increased communication allows for increased variances and the proliferation of horizontal networks of power as opposed to a vertical hierarchy. Such structures allow for increased communication and cohesion by virtue of just being able to stay in touch and arrange future meetings. It also allows for many more voices and subgroups that may lay claim to an identity but insist on establishing their own landscape of belief and through the Internet promulgate it and build corresponding physical structures for a dialectic support between virtual and physical worlds.

It bears stating here that I had very little background in the Zoroastrian community prior to this research. I did not have friends or close associates that I had spoken with over great lengths of time or grown up with. I did have the gracious guidance at key points of scholars working with and in some cases part of the community. Yet, much of what I have come to understand about

the community – their sense of who they are and why some practices are imbued with such spiritual importance- comes from my interactions online and from the wealth of information available online that brought the scholarly work I synchronically reviewed to life. I believe that this underscores the importance and versatility of the Internet in understanding the vitality of collective identity and self definition online, the virtual and physical communities built, and for some individuals their engagement in both on and offline social networks.

One can obtain knowledge from books, but this does not replace the wisdom and understanding that comes from social interaction and involvement. This study was an opportunity to begin that process of interaction and involvement that has introduced me to several individuals within the community that are very active and often polarizing figures. Online dialogue allowed me to speak with and ask questions of individuals such as Khojeste Mistree, Alexander Bard, Ronald Delavaga, and Ali Jafarey who speak for very different perspectives on Zoroastrianism which would have been much more difficult to meet within a conventional frame of ethnographic methodology.

Areas of Future Inquiry

There are several areas that need to be addressed further. As this was an exploratory review of online resources, greater work needs to be done to look at sites in greater detail and identify and understand the extent of use of Persian sites. A wider list of Yahoo! groups with similar perspectives will also provide greater insight into how narrowly targeted lists are. Other search engines like Google and MSN should also be looked at for other groups and a comparison made. With regards to lists, a more detailed analysis of dates of establishment would also allow a stronger pattern to be developed for the trajectory of online resources growth for an historical perspective.

The survey was designed to reveal patterns of usage such as age cohorts, details and preferences of resources, and insight into the strength of practice of Zoroastrian identity by those online to evaluate informant comments against evidence of symbolic ethnicity. Much greater work needs to be done in contacting and working with webmasters and moderators to ask for

assistance in making the survey known to their visitors and membership. Ultimately, the survey is designed to bring out patterns of usage and both seen and hidden impacts of the Internet on the Zoroastrian community which can be further understood through participant observation and interviews.

There are several conferences among the global community yearly as well as community events that will allow me to establish greater ties among members of the community. Participating in public sponsored events will also enable me to observe possible generational differences in the performance of community rituals and understand which values are important in practice as opposed to being residue of the community's official ideals thereby discerning normative from tacit behavior patterns. The interviews are important as they will provide an opportunity to validate survey patterns and, most importantly, elaborate upon individual qualifications to normative statements.

Final Thoughts

Every new development in communication technology and accompanying attempts to examine and understand its impact begins with the utopian belief that each is transformational in its power to shape and influence our world view and identity. Instead, we find that each begins as a mirror reflecting cultural constructs and current power structures. The space of the Internet has become that 'new frontier' where we begin to rebuild the current world, but in that act of 'recreation' it becomes something different as well. The truth then is somewhere in between. Its immense transformational power lies in the mirror it holds up, in the access to and transparency of our inner selves it shows us if we look. Online everyone is offered the tools of creation and narrative to more readily and almost instantaneously take symbols and metaphors and morph them into a virtual body that we can see and touch and, in moments of insight, reshape. The interactive window of the computer screen may even become a place to invite others into what has often been a personal process of reflection. Perhaps the Internet is finally that brave new world in the sense that it convinces us that all narratives are a dialectical interweaving, that each person's story somehow intersects with ours no matter the geographical and cultural separation.

It is a form that allows us to reach deeply into ourselves and handle what we find without filters - a promise of 'touching' even the most deep seated metaphors and symbols forming the fabric of the human psyche and interpretive lens' of our inner worlds. May it give us the range to better understand ourselves and those with whom we share this journey through life.

⁶⁶ <http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/heart33.html>

⁶⁷ (S.M. personal communication)

⁶⁸ Personal communication from Hinnells and Choksy 2006.

⁶⁹ <http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Religions/iranian/Zarathushtrian/iranshah.htm>

⁷⁰ The interface of the site is difficult to navigate and does not have a way to easily post a statement of my interest in the Zoroastrian community as I have done on both Z-book and the Kuwait Zoroastrian Association. This site was only briefly reviewed in consideration of time constraints and the richness of the other two sites.

APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

**This is a small set of terms compiled either from conversations with respondents or from Mary Boyce (2004).

Asha	Scholars translate this as 'order'. Communal usage online often presents variations such as 'Truth'.
Atash-zohr	'offering to fire'
Avesta	The sacred books of the Zoroastrians
Athravan	Also known as Athornan or Andhyaru meaning of the priestly lineage.
Behdin	Lay follower of Zarathushtra
Bombay Parsi Panchayat	Abbreviated as BPP, this organization was created in 1658 and is the, "biggest private body in Mumbai, with over Rs. 40,000 crore holdings and 5000 tenements" (http://parsikhabar.net/parsis-set-to-exercise-their-franchise-for-bpp-polls/). It manages Parsi charities and trusts and is recognized as a government body in India.
Dastur	High priest
Dakhmas	Towers of Silence where the dead have been traditionally exposed to the elements as part of Zoroastrian funerary practices.
Druj, drug	'disorder, falsehood', in some communications I have seen it used in a way that suggests 'evil'.
Ervad	Teacher priest
Frasho-kereti, frashegird	Refers to the 'Last Day', the end of the current, material world.
Fravashi, fravahor	Sometimes referred to as a 'guardian soul', it is a general representation of a spirit where each of the parts such as the wings, layers of feathers, tail, and circle for example represent an idea or philosophy.
Gahambar	One of six holy days of obligation

Gathas	Specifically the hymns written by Zoroaster. Seen by some as the only authentic sacred texts as they are the words of Zoroaster himself.
Jizya	Poll-tax paid by non-Muslims.
Kusti	'Sacred cord' worn as a girdle by Zoroastrians received at their navote.
Mobed	Priest
Nowrooz/Norooz/Norouz	Persian New Year which falls on the Vernal Equinox around March 21 st . There are various spellings based on regional and linguistic differences. Variants also include Nou-Rouz, Novruz, Navruz, Noruz, Nowruz, Nawruz, Nau Rooz
Paygambar	Bearer of holy words, prophet
Saoshyant	the World Savior that is to come.
Yasna	'act of worship', the core Zoroastrian religious service.
Zoata	Accomplished head priest that is a guide for the community

APPENDIX B

Online Zoroastrian Resources

Site Name

Ancient Iranian Cultural & Religious Research & Development Center
AVESTA Zoroastrian Archives
California Zoroastrian Center: Z-Journal, ChehreNama
European Centre for Zoroastrian Studies
FEZANA: Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America
Fravahr.org
Organisation of Bozorg Bazgasht (Big Return)
The Persepolis Reconstruction Project
Parsi Online
Parsi Resource Group: Gen Next Parsis
Parsiana Semi-monthly magazine-The global Zoroastrian link medium
The Religion of Ahura Mazda as revealed by Zarathushtra
The World Zoroastrian Organization
The Zarathushtrian Assembly
Traditional Zoroastrian Website
Zoroastrian Born Again
UNESCO Parzor Project

URL

<http://www.ahura.homestead.com>
<http://www.ancientiran.com/>
www.avesta.org
www.czcjournal.org
<http://www.gatha.org/>
www.fezana.org
<http://www.fravahr.org/>
<http://www.bozorgbazgasht.com>
<http://www.persepolis3d.com/>
www.parsionline.com/
www.parsiresourcegroup.org
www.parsiana.com
www.zoroaster.com
www.w-z-o.org
www.zoroastrian.org
www.ahuramazda.com
<http://zoroastrianbornagain.com/index-english.html>
<http://unescoparzor.com>

Vision-Divine.com	www.vision-divine.com
Vohuman.org	http://www.vohuman.org
WAPIZ -World Alliance of Parsi & Irani Zarthoshtis	www.wapiz.com
World of Traditional Zoroastrianism	www.zoroastrianism.com
World of Traditional Zoroastrianism: Tenets/Main page	http://tenets.parsizoroastrianism.com/
World Zarathushti Chamber of Commerce	www.wzcc.net
World Zoroastrian Council	www.wzconline.com
Zarathushtra	www.zarathushtra.com
Zoroastrian Community	http://www.webzc.com
Zoroaster.net	www.zoroaster.net
Zoroastrian Education and Research Society (No longer active)	http://www.z-e-r-s.org
Zoroastrian Kids Corner: Rebecca Cann	www.zoroastriankids.com
Zoroastrian Religion	www3.sympatico.ca/zoroastrian
Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe	www.ztfe.com
Zoroastrian World Information (ZWINFO)	http://www.geocities.com/bombayparsees/index.html
Zoroastrian@net (No longer active)	www.geocities.com/farz3
Zoroastrianism for Mankind	
Zarathushtrian Assembly of Miami (2006)	
The Restored Zarathushtrian Community	www.zoroastrianism.cc
Zoroastrianism Today	www.geocities.com/zoroastrianismtoday/main.htm
Zoroastrians.net	http://zoroastrians.net
University Organizations	
Stanford Zoroastrian Associ (archived)	
Community/State & Country Organizations	
Atlanta Zarthushti Association	http://www.atlantazarathushtiassociation.org
AZA: Australian Zoroastrian Association of New South Wales	http://www.aza.org.au
Calcutta Parsees (No longer active)	www.calparsees.com
California Zoroastrian Center	http://www.californiazoroastriancenter.org/
Cusrow Baug: Parsi Bombay Community	http://www.cusrowbaug.org/

Delhi Parsis	http://delhiparsis.com/
KZBM: Karachi Zarhosti Banu Mandal	www.geocities.com/banumandal/
Los Angeles Zoroastrian Cultural Center	http://www.lazcc.org
Mazda Yasna: "Russian Anjoman"	http://blagoverie.org/eng/anjoman/index.phtml
Ontario Zoroastrian Community Foundation	http://www.ozcf.com/
Parsi Zoroastrian Association of Singapore	www.pza.org.sg
Persian Zoroastrian Organization	www.pzo.info/
Poona Zoroastrians	http://www.poonazoroastrians.org
The Zoroastrian Society of British Columbia	www.zsbc.org
ZAC-Zoroastrian Assoc. of California	www.zacla.org
ZAGBA: Zoroastrian Assoc. of Greater Boston Area	www.zagba.org
ZAH: Zoroastrian Association of Houston	http://www.zah.org/
ZAMWI: Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington	http://www.zamwi.org/
ZAPANJ: Zoroastrian Association of Pennsylvania & New Jersey	http://www.zapanj.org/
Zarathustrian Association of New Zealand	http://www.zanz.org.nz/
Zarthoshti Anjuman of Northern California	www.zanc.org
ZAV: Zoroastrian Association of Victoria	http://www.zav.org.au/
ZAWA-Zoroastrian Assoc. of Western Australia Inc.	www.zawa.asn.au
Zoroastrian Assoc. of Greater New York	www.zagny.org
Zoroastrian Assoc. of Texas	www.zant.org
Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago	www.zac-chicago.org
Zoroastrian Association of Quebec	http://zoroastrianyouth.com
Zoroastrian Association of Shiraz	shiraz.freesevers.com
	http://zasf.org/index.asp
Zoroastrian Association of South Florida	http://zafatash.tripod.com/
Zoroastrian Society of Ontario	www.zso.org
Personal Websites	
Bread for the Head	http://www.bread4thehead.com/

In Search of The Zoroastrians: Jenny Desai

<http://parsiqueen.tripod.com/index.html>

Jasmine Bhathena's Home on the Web

<http://jasminebhathena.tripod.com/index.html>

Mazdayasna

<http://mazdayasni.blogspot.com/>

Parsi Recipes

www.jamvaachaaloji.8m.com

Personal page of Dr. Behizade (Iran)

<http://www.geocities.com/behizade/index.html>

Pyracantha Studios: Hannah Michael Gale Shapero

<http://www.pyracantha.com/zoroastrianism.html>

The Last Parsees

<http://www.geocities.com/naveak99/lastparsi1.html>

Zoroastrian Religion: Soli S. Bamji

www3.wympatico.ca/zoroastrian/

Zoroastrian World Information (ZWINFO)

<http://www.geocities.com/bombayparsees/index.html>

Zoroastrianism Page

<http://cobweb.ecn.purdue.edu/~bulsara/ZOROASTRIAN/zoroastrian.html>

Zoroastrianism, The Great Religion

<http://www.geocities.com/narielwalla2005/zoroastrianism.html>

World Zoroastrian News Network

www.WZNN.org

Zubin's Zoroastrian Zone

<http://www.zubin.com/zoroastrian/>

Special Interest

Association of Inter-Married Zoroastrians

<http://www.aimzindia.org/>

FEZANA: Blog spot

<http://fezana.blogspot.com/>

FEZANA: Interfaith Blog spot

<http://fezana-interfaith-activities.blogspot.com/>

FEZANA: UN Blog spot

<http://fezana-un-ngo.blogspot.com/>

Iranian Zoroastrian Women's Organization

Through the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ottawa, Canada

<http://www.salamiran.org/Women/Organisations/izwo.html>

Jeevansathi - Matrimonial page

www.jeevansathi.com

North American Mobed Council

<http://www.namcweb.org/about.htm>

Persepolis: Site for Zoroastrian Youth

<http://persepolis.ning.com/>

World of Traditional Zoroastrianism: Saga of the Aryans

<http://saga.parsizoroastrianism.com/>

Shaadi.com

shaadi.com

The Missing Parsi

<http://www.themissingparsi.com/>

The Parsi Chronicle	http://www.theparsichronicle.com/
The Parsi Directory	http://www.theparsidirectory.com/default.asp
The Parsi Match	http://www.theparsimatch.com
The Parsi Video	http://www.theparsivideo.com/
Udvada Renovation	http://udvadarenovation.blogspot.com/
Zpeakerbox - first online Zyouth magazine	http://www.zpeakerbox.narius.net/vb/
Zoroastrian Matrimonial Page	http://matrimonial.parsizoroastrianism.com/
Zoroastrian Priestly Services	http://priest.yasna.com/

Zoroastrian Sports Committee: FEZANA	http://www.zathletics.com/
ZWIN (Zarathushti/Zoroastian Women's Int. Network	www.zwin3.net

News sites: database of articles

Zoroastrians.info	www.topix.net/religion/zoroastrian
Zoroastrian News	www.newszoom.com/search/latest/zoroastrian/news/
TheParsiChronicle.com	http://www.on-lyne.info/zoroastrian.htm
	http://www.zoroastrians.info
	http://zoroastriannews.wordpress.com
	www.theparsichronicle.com

Parsi Khabar	http://parsikhabar.net
Parsi World	www.parsiworld.com

Commercial Sites

Awazuni	http://www.awazuni.com/
Bamanbehram Photography & Videography	http://www.bamanbehram.com
Z-Cards-"Non-Commercial-Free site"	http://www.zubin.com/zcards/zoroastrian

Listservs

Mainstream Zoroastrians	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MainstreamZoroastrians/
Traditional Zarathushtris Mailing List (TZML)	TraditionalZarathushtris-subscribe@egroups.com

Working Zoroastrians	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/working_zoroastrian/
YoungZoroastrians	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/YoungZoroastrians/
Zartosht	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/zartosht/
Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington, Inc.	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ZAMWI/
Zoroastrian News Agency	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/zna/
Zoroastrianism and Mazdakism	http://forums.delphiforums.com
ZWINZISN ZWIN Zoroastrian Int'l Students Network	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/zwinzisin/
atashkadeh	www.alt.religion.zoroastrian
Persian Sites	http://uk.groups.yahoo.com
Found on atashkadeh Yahoo group: Bozorg Bazgasht	http://zartosht.org
Amordad	http://www.amordad.net/
Amordad- English version by request	http://www.amordaden.blogfa.com/
Berasad	http://www.berasad.com/
Hamazoor	http://hamazoor.com/
Parsiblog	http://www.parsiblog.com
Stockholm Zoroastrian Association	http://szf.se/farsi/
Kerman Zoroastrian Association	http://www.kza.ir/
Council of Tehran Mobeds	http://www.anjomanemobedan.org/
Ahnavad	http://www.ahnavad.com/
Tehran Zoroastrian Anjuman	http://www.t-z-a.org/
Behre: Kurdish	http://www.behre.koskikurd.com/
The Religion Behdini	http://www.kurdavesta.tk/
Persian Heritage Sites/	
IranDokht	www.irandokht.com
O'Shihan-cultural site, Persian	www.oshihan.org
Persian DNA	www.persiandna.com
The Middleeast Information Network	http://www.mideastinfo.com/Religion/zoroastrian.htm

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Reviews

Arewa, E. Ojo. Alan Dundes. "Proverbs and the Ethnology of Speaking Folklore" American Anthropologist. December 1964, #6, Part 2. Special Publication on the Ethnology of Communication. Pg. 70-85. Reviewed for the American Anthropologist Journal Archive Project. October, 2002.

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