

FIRE AND ITS ROLE IN THE CULTURE OF ANCIENT IRAN

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"The following are certain Persian customs, which I will describe from personal knowledge. The erection of statutes, temples, and altars is not an accepted practice among them, and any one who does such a thing is considered a fool, because, presumably, the Persian religion is not anthropomorphic like the Greek."

"As for ceremonial, they erect no altar and kindle no fire; the libation, the flute music, the garlands, the sprinkled meal - all these things, familiar to us, they have no use for;"

Herodotus. 480 - 425 BCE

According to a document dated 614 ACE, the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* records the following dialogue between Mihram Gushnasp a former Zarathushti converted to Christianity and a Zarathushti priest.

Priest: We in no way hold fire to be God, but only pray to God through fire, as you do through the Cross.

Mihram: But we do not say, as you do to the fire, "We pray to you, Cross, God."

Priest: That is not so. (We do not say it either.)

Mihram: So you say in your Avesta that it is a god.

Priest: We reverence fire because it is of the same nature as Ormazd.

Mihram: Does Ormazd have everything which fire has?

Priest: Yes.

Mihram : Fire consumes dung and horse droppings, and, in brief, whatever comes to it. Since Ormazd is of the same nature, does he also consume everything like it?

As the source in question is a Christian text, the priest's reply to this challenge, if he offered one is not recorded.ⁱ

Think not of them as fire worshipers
For of God they were pure worshipers

Ma pandar ka atash parast bodand
Parastandeh pak e yazdan bodand

Ferdowsi Toosi 1000ACE

These statements from different periods in history, all try to discount the propaganda that ancient Iranians, namely Zarathushtrians, were Fire Worshipers, or that they worshiped Fire instead of God, and that the teachings of Zarathushtra the sage of ancient Iran had anything to do with worshipping fire.

But this propaganda continues to this day and is used by opponents to divert attention from the real teachings of Zarathushtra, which they fear.

IMPORTANCE OF FIRE

Fire is an essential part of the universe and plays an important role in its formation and evolution. Fire has been part of our planet from its inception; the cooling down from its fiery past has made it possible for life to thrive on earth; at the same time life without fire and heat would not be the same.

Humans, with fear and fascination, have witnessed volcanoes and their hot fiery lava, they have watched lightnings strike and burn jungles. They have sometimes understood Fire and controlled it at and other times it has been beyond their comprehension and they have feared it and worshiped it.

Capturing and taming fire had been the preoccupation of humans specially since they realized the benefits of fire. Ferdowsi in his epic "Shahnameh", attributes the important **'art of lighting a fire'** to Hoshang Shah of the Pishdadian dynasty. He recounts how one day Hoshang was traveling with his army when he sees a huge dragon, he throws a stone to kill it, but misses and instead hits another stone and sparks a fire. From this incidence the Iranians learned how to light a fire at will. To commemorate this important discovery they named that day "Sadeh" and to this day Iranians celebrate Sadeh around a bonfire.

Based on evidence excavated in Kenya and South Africa controlled use of fire existed 1,420,000 years ago and the fire making techniques were developed in around 7000 BCE.

Having learned to make fire at will, life takes a different turn, winters become comfortable, food becomes palatable, metal is extracted and implements made. In short, the possibility to control fire changes the pattern of human life and so earns fire even more respect.

From among the elements, fire has an air of mysticism, it is mesmerizing, it is heavenly; you can see it existing in the sun and the stars. It demands respect and has received it. Every religion uses fire in some form or the other in their communication with God.

FIRE AND THE ARYAN CULTURE

For the Aryans who lived in the cold of the northern hemisphere, being able to partially control fire was a boon. It was but natural that soon a organization be formed around this important element that changed their life. The wise among them studying the fire and making rules for its safe upkeep, the average people following these rules as rituals. Even today simple things in our daily life are controlled by sets of rules and regulations, we follow them most of the time without questioning their legitimacy. Very soon we get so used to it that they become part of our daily rituals.

Avesta and the Veda the two ancient sources that tell us about the Aryan people; mention fire with great respect and discuss it extensively. This by itself shows the importance of fire and its exalted place in their life.

VEDA

Veda means 'Knowledge'.

The Veda is the ancient books of the Aryans and contains the most sacred scriptures of the Hindus. The Veda has been divided into four parts, Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda.

The Veda is in the form of Hymns, which are written in poetic form and consists of praises, blessings, sacrifices, and curses. These hymns were the major way in which the Aryan people praised their gods. **These gods, the subjects of the hymns, are in fact the personification of the powers of nature.**

RIG VEDA

The Rig Veda is an important part of the Veda the holy book of the Hindus and it starts with a song in praise of "AGNI" the Fire. Eight out of the ten Books of the Rig Veda starts with a chapter on "Agni". Each Book has numerous chapters on "Agni" for example; in Book 1, out of 191 chapters, 41 are about "Agni" the Fire, that's a good 21 percent.

A translation of a couple of the Hymns will give us an idea of what they say.

Rig Veda Book 2 Hymn 1. AGNI

THOU, Agni, shining in thy glory through the days, art brought to life from
out the waters, from the stone:
From out the forest trees and herbs that grow on ground, thou, Sovran
Lord of men art generated [sic] pure.
Thine is the Herald's task and Cleanser's duly timed; Leader art thou,
and Kindler for the pious man.
Thou art Director, thou the ministering Priest: thou art the Brahman, Lord
and Master in our home.

Rig Veda Book 10 Hymn 1 AGNI

HIGH hath the Mighty risen before the dawning,
And come to us with light from out the darkness.
Fair-shapen Agni with white-shining splendor
Hath filled at birth all human habitations.

Thou, being born, art Child of Earth and Heaven,
Parted among the plants in beauty,
Agni! The glooms of night thou, Brilliant Babe,
Subduest, and art come forth, loud roaring, from thy Mothers.

AVESTA

VESTA means knowledge.

"A" when added to a word makes it negative. So AVesta means "knowledge that was not known". In other words Avesta would be the right name for a collection of research papers of scholars in various fields. This would also be in accordance with the teachings of

Zarathushtra the sage of ancient Iran, who advised his followers to be in pursuit of knowledge and to spread the derived knowledge.

Knowledge when you gain
With minds good use
Having realized wisdom
The path to righteousness
The ultimate message of Wisdom
Through words excellent
We shall turn (convert)
Those who do not know
(With tongue) By speaking
Zarathushtra - Gatha Yasna HA 28.5 (FR)

Avesta has also become the name of the language in which this collection is written. With the passage of time the Avesta language became extinct and was confined to small groups of people. The rest of the population helped in preserving it by simply memorizing the poems.

In comparison to Veda the Avesta mentions fire less frequently.

In Yasna Ha.25 among the good creations that are revered one of them is Fire.

Ha.25.1 The eternal holy laws, virtuous rulers, belonging to the good creation are revered -----

25.2 This offering of wholesome waters, accompanied with a true worshiper rich in flocks ever a source of righteousness is raised up and revered ----

25.4 Ahura Mazda the brilliant and glorious is revered ---

25.5 The righteous atmosphere is revered ----

25.6 The most glorious law of Ahura Mazda is revered ----

25.7 The purifying Fire of Ahura Mazda is revered. You purifying fire of Ahura Mazda the righteous master of righteousness is revered. All fires are revered. The holding fast of intelligence created by Mazda and singing praise of the holy splendour worthy of adoration is revered.ⁱⁱ

GATHA & FIRE

The Gathas of Zarathushtra, which are part of Avesta, mentions the word "FIRE" only eight times, mostly metaphorically.

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| Ha.31.3 | "Maino Athra" | "Mental blaze" |
| Ha.31.19 | "Athra Sukhra Mazda" | "Radiant fire of Wisdom" |
| Ha.34.4 | "Athram Ahura" | "Fire of Creation " |

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| Ha.43.4 | "Garma Athrav Asha" | "Warmth of the Fire of Asha" |
| Ha.43.9 | "Thwahmai Athre" | "Your inner Flame" |
| Ha.46.7 | "Thwamat Athras cha Managhas" | "The Fire of your thoughts" |
| Ha.47.6 | "Athra Vangha ranoibya" | "Fire benefits all" |
| Ha.51.9 | "Athra Sukhra Mazda" | "Radiant Fire of Wisdom" |

In the Gathic concept, fire is pertaining to the heat of the internal zeal with regard to the effort to create and progress and make the world a better place.

Mental Blaze - Radiant Fire of Wisdom - Fire of Creation - Inner Flame - The Warmth of the Fire of Asha - Fire of your Thoughts - these have nothing to do with the physical fire. They are used to metaphorically emphasize the enthusiasm and effort, and the importance of the proper use of the Wisdom, which results in the kind of progress that is within the confines of the laws of nature and benefits all mankind.

In the Gathas and in ancient Iran, Fire does not play any religious, ceremonial or ritualistic role. If we study the Bas-reliefs at Takht e Jamshid (Persepolis) we do not find fire portrayed in any form. Nor do the records talk of any grand fire temple having being built or being in existence. Keeping in mind the fact that the kings who built Takht e Jamshid mention Ahura Mazda the God of Zarathushtra as their God. Herodotus also vouches this for he says, "As for ceremonial,.....they erect no altar and **kindle no fire**".

EMERGING ROLE OF FIRE AMONG THE IRANIANS

Fires needed watching, not only to keep them from going out, but from spreading, or theft, so a fire-keeper was delegated to the work, thus starting a social organization. An organization that, like any other organization would like to see its work recognized and respected and would thus strive towards achieving it.

It is around 100 BCE, for the first time, we see fire replacing the Parthian queen on one side of the coin. Among the Parthian the ancient Mehr or Mithra was revived as a god. Mehr was the sun god and fire was its

representative on earth. Fire was housed in what they called Dar-e-Mehr and to this day the Fire Temples are called Bar-e -Mehr or Dar-e-Mehr. The Greek writers *Strabo and Pausanius* have described the presence of Fire Temples in the Parthian times and he says that Vassal kings were allowed to establish their own dynastic fires.

Mithraism became a powerful religion; the Roman soldiers and traders who were in Iran were also converted to Mithraism and they on returning home introduced it to Europe. Very soon it was wide spread all over Europe and became known as the religion of the soldiers and traders. When Christianity became the state religion in Rome they could not do away with Mithraism so they incorporated it into Christianity.ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly in Iran when the Sassanians made Zarathushtrianism their state religion they incorporated Mithraism into their neo-Zarathushtrianism.

In the Sasanian era most of the important fire temples were built and their fire established. *King Ardashir* is credited for the establishment of the *Atash-Varahram (Atash-Behram)* the *Verethraghna* fires of victory in Pars. The inscriptions of Karder a head priest who lived through four Sasanian monarchs speak of another fire *Atash-i-Aduran* a common local fire "the little fire in an appointed place." Today commonly known as the "Atash Kadeh" or "agiyari". Also prayers in praise of the fire were written and incorporated into the Avesta.

Fire compared to air, water or earth has a mystical effect. It gives one the feeling of spiritual elevation. Concentrating on the flickering flames it mesmerizes and relaxes the mind. It helps the mind enter the Alpha stage where the mind works at its best. With all these qualities it is but natural for fire to be elevated to the position of a communication facilitator with God.

All modern day religions have a media between themselves and their God. In Islam it is the House of God in Mecca. The Muslim wherever they be, to communicate with God they face towards the House of God in Mecca. This can give the impression that God lives only within the confines of the house of God.

In Christianity the cross is the media. The cross occupies an elevated position in the church and prayers are said facing the cross. The priests and the pope bless their congregation by making the sign of the cross.

The need for a media of communication is seen in human nature and all religions have established it. In Zarathushtism Fire gradually assumes that role of the go-between. Fire is part of nature; it has the capability of elevating the mind to the alpha level, where the mind works at its best, and can lead to self-realization -KHOD AH. All this and more makes it the best media in the quest to achieve perfection, if used in the right spirit.

With the passage of time the original purpose of fire is forgotten and instead stories were created of baby Zarathushtra being tossed into fire and not being burnt. Even the modern day picture of Zarathushtra shows him holding a ball of heavenly fire.

FIRE IN OTHER CULTURES

Fire is a powerful elemental symbol in the psyche, and it has been present in virtually every religion known to humanity. Today every culture and all religions have some form of fire in its ceremonies be it a candle or a bonfire. The significance of fire can be demonstrated by the numerous stories about fire in mythology and religion as a divine entity or force.

GREEK

The importance of fire for the Greek can be seen in this legend where it is the subject of heavenly feud. According to Greek legend Zeus, having been deceived by Prometheus into only accepting the bones of animal sacrifice, denies man the use of fire. Prometheus steals fire from Hephaestus to save humanity. In retribution Zeus binds Prometheus to Mount Caucasus where an eagle perpetually gorges on Prometheus' liver by day, whilst the liver regenerates by night. It was to counterbalance the gift of fire that Zeus created Pandora and gave her a box filled with all the evils of the world.

The Olympic Flame or the Olympic Fire the symbol of the international Olympic games commemorates the theft of fire from the Greek god Zeus by Prometheus. This tradition has been kept alive to this day and performed every four years internationally.

The Greek philosophers also believed fire to be of high significance. Aristotle declared fire, along with water, earth, and air, to be one of the four general and essential elements of life and of all things. Plato proposed that God used the four elements to create the world. Heraclitus classified fire as the essential force of creation.

INCAS & AZTECS

The Incas and the Aztecs worshiped fire-gods. It was believed that the Sun was directly linked to fire; the Incas would ignite their sacred flames with the Sun's rays. The Aztecs believed that the Sun and the Moon were the result of their gods' sacrifice to a vast fire; two of them, Nanahuatzin, a small deity covered with ulcers, and Tecciztécatl threw themselves into the flames, from which the former emerged as the sun and the latter as the moon. Then the Sun refused to move unless the other gods gave him their blood and they were compelled to sacrifice themselves to feed the Sun.

LITHUANIANS AND THE BALTIC RELIGION

Baltic religion is based on local mythology, folklore and ethnic heritage. The heritage of different ethnic and linguistic groups in Lithuania is rich, full of holiness and faith. This faith has survived in the form of, nation's traditions, songs, language and morals, regardless of the efforts of the Christian Church.

Romuva – an old Baltic religion – is the revival of the Baltic spiritual tradition that expresses the religious world concept of Old Europe and the Indo-Europeans. This culture survived in many national cultures of the Baltic region. Historically, in the Middle Ages, Romuva was one of the last important European Pagan temples. Today, the place is located in the Kaliningrad region, formerly known as East Prussia, and originally – the ancient Baltic Prusa. Besides the central Romuva, there were many local Romuvas that thrived in the wide region of the Baltic. The goal of the Romuva movement is reviving and continuing the ancient Lithuanian faith.^{iv}

The Fire Ritual is the most important ritual in the Baltic religion.

"To this very day fire is sacred to all Lithuanians. No other phenomenon fits religion so well as fire. Only the flame turns wisdom to the path of spirituality" wrote the prominent Lithuanian philosopher, Vyduenas.

During every traditional Baltic holiday a fire (Ugnis) is lit, whether it is in an altar or bonfire, or by candle. Fire is the most important symbol of Lithuanian traditions. During ancient times, the Baltic people were known as fire worshipers.^v

The Eternal Flame burned at Sventaragis Valley at the very center of Vilnius. Every household had a hearth, which was particularly respected by each member of the family, but cared for and safeguarded by the mother. The fire had greater meaning than merely the source of light and

warmth. It symbolized the unbroken lifeline of the family and its ancestry. The Eternal Flame of the community served to unify not only its immediate members, but was also the unifying link with ancestors who had long since died. It was believed that numerous generations of the dead continued to live on at the hearth of the fire.

"Throughout all of Lithuania, people held fire to be sacred. Thus it was required to honour it and behave before it with respect. Coals had to be closely accumulated. Fire could be extinguished only with cold and clean water. Fire was not to be insulted. It was not to be harmed nor polluted. People were not to spit into fire, nor was it permitted to kick it or to stomp upon it. All that was considered sinful, and any such actions were sure to invite punishment, either while the person was still alive or after their death" (J. Balys, Lietuviu Tautosakos Lobynas (Treasure Chest of Lithuanian Folklore), 1951, pg.39).

SEMITIC RACE & FIRE

For the Semitic race the importance of Fire can be seen in the fact that God communicated in the form of Fire with the early Semitic prophets, who are common to all three modern day branches namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

BIBLE

Fire is mentioned over 450 times in the Old and New Testaments -- some of the important ones are quoted below.

Ex 3:2 And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.

Ex 19:18 And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.

Lev 6:12 And the fire upon the altar shall be burning in it; it shall not be put out: and the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and lay the burnt offering in order upon it; and he shall burn thereon the fat of the peace offerings.

Deut 5:4 The LORD talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire,

Deut 10:4 And he (Moses) wrote on the tables, according to the first writing, the ten commandments, which the LORD spoke unto you in the

mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly: and the LORD gave them unto me.

Mt 3:11- I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire:

Acts 7:30 And when forty years were expired, there appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sina an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush.

1 Cor 3:13 Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is.

Heb 12:29 For our God is a consuming fire.

KORAN

[20.9] And has the story of Musa come to you?

[20.10] When he saw fire, he said to his family: Stop, for surely I see a fire, haply I may bring to you there from a live coal or find guidance at the fire.

[20.11] So when he came to it, a voice was uttered: O Musa:

[20.12] Surely I am your Lord, therefore put off your shoes; surely you are in the sacred valley, Tuwa.

[20.13] And I have chosen you, so listen to what is revealed:

This is again repeated a little latter:

[27.7] When Musa said to his family: Surely I see fire; I will bring to you from it some news, or I will bring to you there from a burning firebrand so that you may warm yourselves.

[27.8] So when he came to it a voice was uttered saying: Blessed is Whoever is in the fire and whatever is about it; and glory be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds;

[27.9] O Musa! surely I am Allah, the Mighty, the Wise;

We see that repeatedly God appears in the form of Fire in the Bible and the Koran.

God appearing to Abraham in the form of Fire to put the practice of child sacrifice to an end.

The Ten Commandments were communicated to Moses through fire.

There is also instruction as to the maintenance of perpetual fire on the Altar (Lev 6.12).

CONCLUSION

The teachings of Zarathushtra the sage of ancient Iran has nothing to do with the physical fire. The Gathas of Zarathushtra is a recipe for progress on the path towards perfection. It is not about worship and worshipping, it is about doing and achieving. It is not about asking for a boon, it is about how to convert dreams into reality.

The followers of his teachings have chosen fire as a media, in their quest for self-realization - Khod-Ah, in their communication with God -Khod-Ah, and as a facilitator on their path towards perfection. Fire is never considered to be a God of any sort.

Religions in general and the Aryan people in particular revere fire and use it with respect in their ceremonies. If the collective scriptures of all religions are taken as testimony reverence of Fire is a positive and good custom, we see God manifesting himself in the form of Fire in the Semitic scriptures.

Why then is such form of worship looked down upon? Why then do those who worship God through fire have to defend their action? Why not instead educate the accusers of the exalted place fire occupies in their own scriptures and introduce them to Wisdom, through the teachings of Zarathushtra.

ⁱ Spirituality in the land of the Noble- How Iran Shaped the World Religions. By Richard C Foltz. Oneworld Publication. ISBN 1-85168-336-4

Ausgewahlte Aketen persischer Martyrer, translated by O Braun (Bibliothek der Kirchenvater, 1915), v, 22,p. 109; cited in Boyce, Zoroastrians, p 140.

ⁱⁱ Yasna -English Version by T.R.Sethna

ⁱⁱⁱ See IRAN ZAMIN Vol. 2 No. 2 - Feb.2002 Where the subject of Mithraism has been discussed.

^{iv} Lithuanian folklore as a source of Baltic religion: the fire ritual by Inija Trinkuniene

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^v Lithuanian folklore as a source of Baltic religion: the fire ritual by Inija Trinkuniene.