

The Traditional Funeral Ceremony

Death in the Offing

According to the tradition, a dying person should recite the *Patēt* prayer together with as many *Ashem Vohūs* as possible, failing which, a member of the family should recite the afore-said prayers into the ears of the dying person.

Haoma juice (*Guj. hōm nū pāni*) is given to the dying person in order that the soul may gain strength and immortality in the other world. An oil lamp (*Guj. dīvo*) must always be kept burning close to the head of the person as it is believed that a short while before death, the soul is timid and begins to hover outside the body.

Immediately upon Death

The prayer vigil should be maintained as the soul is deemed to be frightened and anxious, having been suddenly exposed to another state at the moment of death. The *gāh* prayer, the *Patēt Ravān-nī* and the *Sraosh Yasht Vadī* are some of the prayers that may be recited before the corpse is given the final ritual bath known in Gujarati as the *sachkar*. Before the *sachkar*, both Zoroastrians as well as non-Zoroastrians are traditionally allowed to pay their last respects to the deceased.

The *Sachkar*: The Final Ritual Bath

This may be given by a member of the household or by professional helpers at the *bangli*.¹ Traditionally, the corpse is rubbed down with *gaomez* (unconsecrated bull's urine), followed by the washing of the body with luke-warm water.

The genitals of the corpse are covered by a male or female member, as the case may be. The body is dressed in old, white, clean clothes. The *kūstī* is finally tied in the usual manner around the waist of the corpse, with the recitation of the basic prayers. The hands of the corpse are crossed across the chest, the face is exposed and the body is covered with an old, clean, white cotton shroud.

1. A place where the final death rituals are performed.

Close Zoroastrian friends and relatives of the deceased then bid their private farewells, as thenceforth no one can touch the body except the corpse bearers (*nasasalars*).

Heightened Activity of the Corpse Demons

After the *sachkar* ceremony has been performed, the corpse demons begin to increase in number and in activity, in spite of them being ritually contained. "...the body of those passed away is contaminating; the *nasu* (corpse demon) rushes on it, and owing to its violence... puts itself into the place of the body, that body is then for that reason, called *nasai* (dead matter)." (*Dd.17.7*, *SBE* Vol. 18 p 39).

In the *Vendidād*, the corpse demon (*nasu*) is vividly described. "...then the *druj nasu* flies away to the regions of the north, in the shape of a raging fly, with knees and tail sticking out, droning without end, and like unto the foulest *khrafstras* (noxious creatures)." (*Vd.7.2* p 77).

The Role of the Corpse Bearers (*Nasasalars*)

The corpse bearers enter the room in *palwand*, connected to each other by a cord, having taken the *Bāj* of *Sraosh*². The *nasasalars* place the body on three stone slabs, ensuring that the head is not positioned in a northerly direction for it is believed that the corpse demons come from the northern climes.

The *nasasalars* then draw a parameter (*kasha*) thrice around the corpse with a nail or any other metallic object; whilst doing so, they recite as many *Yathā Ahū Vairyōs* as possible. This practice of creating a demarcated space around the corpse is done in order that the infectious corpse demons may be ritually contained.

2. The *Sraosh Bāj* is recited upto the last line of the *Kām nā Mazdē* prayer - *mā mēnchānīsh gāthēō astavañtīsh ashahē* - "Do not destroy the creation of the righteous corporeal world".

The *nasasalars* then complete reciting the remaining portion of the *Sraosh Bāj*, after which they leave the room and once again do their *kūstīs*. The body is then ritually ready for the all-important funeral ceremony (*Guj. geh sārnu*) to take place.

The Interim Period

Often, many hours elapse between the *sachkar* ritual and the actual funeral ceremony, which can only be performed in the *Hāvan*, *Rapithwin* or *Uzērīn gāhs*. A Zoroastrian funeral should take place only during the daylight hours, as it is believed that the rays of the sun have a strong protective and purifying effect on the afflicted body. "At the time when the sun rises, then the Ahura-created earth becomes pure.... the stagnant waters become pure..." (*Ny.1.12*). At night the corpse is said to become more susceptible to the forces of evil, for "...if the sun were not to rise up then the demons would destroy all (things) which are on the seven regions" (*Ny.1.13*). It is for this reason that a Zoroastrian funeral service takes place during the daylight hours only.

In the meantime, the prayer vigil over the corpse continues, in order to give sustained protection to the body and soul. A priest or a relative should recite a series of prayers such as the *Sraosh Bāj*, the relevant *gāh* prayer, the *Patēt Ravān-nī*, the first and second *Gāthās* followed by the *Sraosh Yasht Vadi* as well as the *Sraosh Yasht Hādokht* or any other prayer connected with the *Yazata Sraosh*. If these longer prayers are not known, then the continuous recitation of as many *Ahunavars* as possible is indeed desirable.

The *Sagdid*: "Being Seen by the Dog"

Upon the change of each *gāh*, a *sagdid* is done, during which a special dog is brought to cast his eyes upon the corpse. This dog is believed to have four eyes (*Vd.8.16*) and its gaze is meant to ward off the evil *nasu* who, it is stated, is frightened away. "...and afterwards

when seen by it, the *nasu* is destroyed by it." (*Shn.sh.2.1*). These dogs are also said to have an instinctive ability to detect any form of life in the corpse. The dog is considered to be the best amongst the good creatures for it has the ability to smite the demons. "...this is the good creature among the creatures of the Good Spirit that, from midnight till the sun is up, goes and kills thousands of creatures of the Evil Spirit." (*Vd.13.2*).

The dog, man's best friend, is given special status in Zoroastrian doctrine because its soul is said to have a link between the spiritual and physical worlds. "Then comes the beautiful, well-shaped, strong and well-formed maid (*Daēnā*) with the dogs at her sides..." (*Vd.19.30*).

The Funeral Ceremony

The funeral ceremony in Gujarati is known as the *geh sārnu* ("chanting the *Gāthās*"). The *nasasalars*, having done their respective *pādyāb-kūstīs*,³ enter the room in *paiwand*, after having taken the *Bāj* of *Sraosh*. In suppressed tones, they recite a formula in accordance with the tradition. The *nasasalars* then sit in *paiwand* on the stone floor, waiting for the priests to come.

Two priests come in *paiwand*, having done their *pādyāb-kūstīs* and having recited the *Sraosh Bāj*, the appropriate *gāh* prayer and the *Khorshēd* and *Mihr Nyāishes*. They stand some distance from the body near the door. They then take the *Bāj* of *Sraosh*, after which they begin to recite the *Ahunavaiti Gāthā*. Upon the recitation of the words *yehya veredā vanaēma drujim* — "through whose strength we might conquer the Lie" (*Y.31.4*) — the priests pause for a short while and turn their faces away, a practice which should be

3. The words *Khshnaoθra Ahuraē Mazdaō* are uttered, followed by the *Ashem Vohū* prayer. The exposed parts of the body are washed thrice and then the *kūstī* ritual is done.

followed by the ladies as well. During this period another *sagdid* is done, after which the corpse is transferred onto the iron bier by the *nasasalars*.

(The priests turn their faces away, for it is believed that if eye contact takes place between the priests and the corpse demons, then affliction and harm may befall the priests. This risk is further heightened due to the fact that the body at this point is transferred from the stone slabs onto the iron bier, resulting in the disturbance and the possible escape of the ritually contained corpse demons. Hence, the priests as well as the others in the room should turn their faces away in order to remain protected from the evil effects of the *nasus*).

The *nasasalars* either cough or clap to indicate when it is safe for the priests to face the corpse once again, whereupon they continue with the prayers. Upon the completion of the recitation of the first *Gāthā*, the *Bāj* of *Sraosh* is also concluded, bringing to an end the main funeral service.

The Sezdo

Upon the completion of the funeral ceremony, the *sezdo* (paying of respect) takes place. Zoroastrian males followed by the invited high priest and then the ladies in the room, all bow to pay their homage to the deceased.

Why are non-Zoroastrians not allowed to pay their respects to the deceased after the *sachkar* ceremony?

As stated earlier, the Zoroastrian viewpoint of death is quite different to that of any other religious system. According to the tradition, death is the work of evil and as such, special precautions by way of ritual purity are to be followed in order to ensure the containment of the corpse demons (*nasus*).

"...the *nasu* rushes upon him to defile him from the nose, eyes, tongue, jaws, sexual organs...making the man unclean henceforth" (*Vd.3.14*). "...how shall I fight against that

druj who, from the dead, defiles the living..?" (*Vd.9.47*).

It is only through the protection afforded by the wearing of the *sudreh* and *kūstī*, coupled with ritual purity, that the living are safeguarded from being attacked by these demons. If the sacred shirt and girdle are not worn, then it is religiously not advisable to be exposed to the naked aggression of the corpse demons. As non-Zoroastrians cannot wear the *sudreh* and *kūstī*, it is for their own safety and protection that they have been restricted from participating in the *sezdo*. With the same token, a pregnant Zoroastrian woman is not allowed to participate in the *sezdo*, as the child in her womb is ritually unprotected. Similarly, no pre-*navjoted* child is allowed to attend the *sezdo*, lest the *nasus* in some way afflict the child.

It is the memory of the deceased that the living pay their respects to, which in no way is lessened by non-Zoroastrians not being allowed to look at the face of the corpse after the *sachkar* ceremony.

The Final Journey

Upon the completion of the *sezdo*, the corpse bearers cover the face of the deceased. The bier is taken out by the *nasasalars* and the other pall-bearers (*khandias*), who carry it towards the Tower of Silence. The male mourners who wish to pay their final respects near the Tower, first take the *Bāj* of *Sraosh* in *paiwand* and are then led in a silent procession by the two officiating priests who walk at a distance of thirty paces behind the funeral cortege, also in *paiwand*. Just outside the perimeter of the Tower of Silence, the bier is once again laid to rest upon the stone platform; here, the face is uncovered for the final *sagdid* to take place. The mourners in *paiwand* pay their very last respects before the face is once again covered by the *nasasalars*. The body is then carried by the *nasasalars* to its final resting place in the Tower of Silence, where it is placed with the head positioned in an easterly direction. The

white cotton shroud is partially torn with a nail or hook, after which the body is left behind for the vultures to devour.

Whilst the *nasasalars* are inside the Tower of Silence, the mourners in *paiwand* retreat to a vantage point from where they can see the door of the Tower. After the *nasasalars* come out of the Tower, the mourners complete reciting the *Bāj* of *Sraosh* followed by the *Dakhma nō Namaskār*. The corpse bearers, upon completing their task, finish reciting the *Bāj* of *Sraosh* and return to do their *kūstīs* once again.

The mourners, no longer in *paiwand*, then proceed to do their *pādyāb-kūstīs*. Upon re-tying their *kūstīs*, they pay their respects to the *Dādgāh* fire where, traditionally, the *Ātash Nyāish* followed by the *Patēt Ravān-nī* is recited.

After the Funeral

All those who attended the funeral ceremony should take a bath in order that the contamination of the corpse demons may be nullified. An oil lamp should be kept burning continuously for three days and nights in the deceased's room.

No fresh meat should be eaten by the family members for three days, as the corpse demons are said to pollute uncooked meat during that period. Grief should be kept to a minimum as tears for the dead are a hindrance to the progress and well-being of the soul.

The *Yazata Sraosh* is propitiated continuously for the next three days, as he is the guardian of all souls as well as the Lord of prayer. "O beautiful holy *Sraosh*, protect us here in these two lives, in these two worlds, in this world which is material, and in that which is spiritual." (*Y.57.25*).

For the next four days, a number of religious ceremonies are performed by the living in

order to give strength and fortitude to the soul. During this period, the soul anxiously awaits its individual judgement which, we are told, takes place on the dawn of the fourth day after death.

In places where it is not possible for a traditional Zoroastrian funeral service to be conducted or for ancillary prayers to be recited, the local alternatives should be followed, bearing in mind as best as possible the doctrinal injunctions with regards to death. If the four-day death rituals cannot be undertaken due to unavoidable circumstances, then they should be done wherever the facilities are available in order to further the progress of the soul. It is believed that the rituals performed in memory of the dead, assist and protect the soul during the all-important transitional period.

The promise of a hereafter is an important belief in Zoroastrianism, as man learns to sow the seeds of righteousness in this world in order to reap the benefits of eternal happiness and immortality in the House of Song.

Two Ibexes (c 5th century B. C.)



Appendix I

On the Disposal of the Dead

The *Dakhma*:

From ancient times the Iranians have used the exposure method as the mode of disposal for their dead. The corpse used to be exposed on high mountain tops to be devoured by birds of prey and wild animals. "...then the worshippers of Mazdā shall lay down the dead – his eyes towards the sun." (*Vd.* 5.13). It seems that the Tower of Silence (*Av. dakhma*) method evolved much later, as there exists no archaeological evidence to indicate the use of such structures in pre-Islamic times.

"In the Zoroastrian tradition it is *hvare daresā*, or, as it is expressed in Persian, *khoshēd nigāresh*⁴ 'beholding by the sun', which is stressed as the chief merit of exposure. The sun's rays, beneficent for the *spenta* creation, are also powerful to burn away the pollutions of the body, which in death belongs to the *daēvic* powers."⁵ Great care therefore should be taken to maintain the ritual laws of purity when a Zoroastrian dies, as "...Ahura Mazdā answered: 'those *dakhmas* that are built upon the face of the earth, O Spitama Zarathushtra! and whereupon are laid the corpses of dead men, that is the place where there are *daēvas*, that is the place whereon troops of *daēvas* rush together....and come rushing along...!'" (*Vd.* 7.56). Hence, Zoroastrians are doctrinally not permitted to burn, bury or drown their dead because the elements are considered to be sacred and the corpse is deemed to be contaminated by the corpse demons (*nasus*).

The corpse is placed in a circular stone structure known as the Tower of Silence where it is exposed to the only unlimited creation the sky

which, together with the sun and birds of prey like vultures, quickens the process of decay and decomposition effectively. As a matter of interest, a vulture cannot fly with food in its mouth or talons plus it is believed to have one of the strongest digestive systems in the world. The corpse is eaten by these birds, as well as it is allowed to decompose by the rays of the sun, resulting in a cost effective, hygienic method of disposal. The big bones that are not eaten by the vultures are exposed to the sun naturally, and so dry up and disintegrate into powder within a short span of time. Inside the Tower of Silence is dug a deep circular pit in hard rock, wherein the powdered remains of the bones are periodically swept.

Critics of this method of disposal seem to have a more favourable attitude towards the burial or cremation method of disposal. Both these systems however, cannot be accepted on the grounds of doctrine if the exposure method is available. The traditional Zoroastrian method of exposure is cheap, hygienic, ecologically sound and above all, an egalitarian mode of disposal whereby the corpse of a rich or poor person is disposed off in exactly the same way with no additional pomp or ceremony. The doctrinal pollution of the earth or the lessening of the purity of the fire are not compatible with the beliefs and practices of the religion and hence in Zoroastrianism, the exposure method is used in preference to any other mode of disposal. However, if this traditional method is not available, then the prevailing local custom should be followed, bearing in mind as best as possible the doctrinal injunctions of the religion.

4. "Thereupon replied Ohrmazd: 'After a year's length, O Holy Zaratusht! the lands become (clean), (where) lie men dead that (are) consigned to the ground enveloped in light, exposed to sun (light).'" (*Pahlavi Vendidad* 7.46, tr. by B.T. Anklesaria).

5. Mary Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* Vol.1 p 325.