Håkon Naasen Tandberg

Relational Religion

Fires as Confidants in Parsi Zoroastrianism

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A head priest and a *dadgah* fire

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

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I can cry before the fire when I'm very unhappy, and the fire understands. I can be excited about something and share with the fire. I mean, I don't really, now, at this stage, need another human being; I feel … You can be alone, but you don't feel lonely: That's my relationship with the holy fire. I don't necessarily feel that I always need human company, now, to be able to get out my innermost feelings. That makes it a very—it's a wonderful comfort zone for me.

Arnaz, first interview.

To Ida, Mons, and Ingrid

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And finally, Janemil—deeply missed but forever present.

Abbreviations[1]

Arab. Arabic
Av. Avestan
MP. Middle Persian
Pahl. Pahlavi
Pers. Persian
PGuj. Parsi Gujarati
San. Sanskrit

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1 In this book, I use simple phonetic spelling rather than a specific transcription system for two reasons: my own lack of philological expertise in the various languages pertaining to this study and my desire to make the text more accessible to the general audience.

List of Illustrations

Foreword

I was first introduced to Håkon Naasen Tandberg's original approach to theories of social interaction during a long wintertime walk on a beach in southern California, as he was just beginning to formulate the outline and structure of his research. Several years later, in December 2017, it was my privilege to witness the showcasing of the outcome of that research at Håkon's "Disputation" in Bergen. As such, I was only a peripheral participant in the development of the doctoral dissertation that informs the following pages, contributing not so much in a significant scholarly capacity, but rather as an incidental sounding board at both its inception and its academic defense.

As the title of this book denotes, the main focus is on the relationship of Parsi Zoroastrians with the continuously burning fires that are central to their religious expression. For over two millennia, "outsiders" have fixated on the role of fire within the religion, struggling to understand its significance to adherents. Is it an object? An emblem of the divine? A divinity in its own right? Perhaps all three simultaneously? The earliest surviving "outsider" account of the ancient Persian religion that evolved into what is now known as Zoroastrianism, is by Herodotus, who, in his *Histories* (3.16) remarked that the Persians regarded fire "as a god." Since then, the import of the centrality of fire to the religion has remained a focal theme in both "outsider" and "insider" descriptions, particularly in terms of the rituals relating to fire. But until now there has been no systematic study of the relational role of Zoroastrians with the fire.

Håkon's seminal work addresses this lacuna through a methodical analysis of contemporary Parsi Zoroastrians' perspectives on their relationship with the consecrated fires that they visit regularly in Mumbai's fire temples. This empirical case study of normative Parsi Zoroastrian thought and praxis sits within a theoretical framework of relationship drawn from the domains of sociology, anthropology, and psychology, as well as the study of religion. Håkon's stimulating expansion of methodologies concerning the social analysis of inter-human relationships to apply to human engagement with non-human entities—specifically here, the relationship of Parsi Zoroastrians with their temple fires—serves to categorize some of the characteristics and mechanisms operating within the broader relationship of humans to that which they consider "divine."

This novel exploration of a specific relational aspect of Zoroastrianism presents a counterbalance to the more prevalent text-based approaches to the religion that tend to concentrate on priestly ritual and interpretation. The inclusion of both "non-specialist" (lay) and "specialist" (priestly) perspectives

in Håkon's carefully conducted qualitative study offers a deeper under-
standing of the importance of the "holy" fires to the everyday lives of
contemporary Parsi Zoroastrians in India.

Jenny Rose
Claremont Graduate University
January 2019

Chapter 1: Approaching the Fires

1.1. Introduction

In this book, I explore when and by what means people extend aspects of social relationships beyond the human to the non-human sphere, focusing on gods and sacred objects—entities typically associated with religion. In order to do so, I went to Mumbai, the most populous city in India and home to a majority of the present-day Zoroastrian community worldwide. Throughout this book, I provide glimpses into the busy everyday lives of a group of Parsi individuals.

Most Parsis are practicing Zoroastrians, and what has often been called "veneration of fires" has attracted attention and speculation from outsiders—from Herodotus in ancient times, through missionaries and travelers encountering Zoroastrianism in India during colonial times. The theme is a "recurrent topic in virtually all modern books written by Zoroastrians about their religion" (Stausberg 2010b, 279).

For many Parsis, a visit to one of the many fire temples in Mumbai, often to attend one of the daily ritual feedings for the holy fires, is an integral part of their everyday routine. By approaching the fires from a relational perspective, zooming in on when and why worshippers conceptualize such fires as social agents, I uncover a hitherto largely overlooked and seemingly integral element of religion as practiced in the everyday lives of contemporary Indian Zoroastrians—lay people as well as religious specialists.

At the same time, in this book I seek to cast light on the subjective processes involved in the establishment of socially meaningful and long-term connections with non-human entities. Through an exploration of individual, social, cultural, material, and ritual processes, this book provides qualitative evidence that humans readily form meaningful, potentially long-lasting, and—from the perspective of the respondents—mutually referential relationships with non-human entities such as the consecrated temple fires.

In addition to this short introduction, this chapter consists of four sections. In the next section (1.2), I present examples of the wide-ranging human propensity to bond socially with non-human entities. I present the theoretical agenda, theorizing human bonding with the non-human as relationships, and operationalize key terms to enable a relational analysis of such bonds. In the third section, I link the theoretical agenda to the empirical case study—present-day Parsi Zoroastrianism—and outline why a relational approach was deemed worthwhile with the empirical case in mind. The fourth section provides a guide to a rich and dynamic set of data and its genesis by discussing the methodological premises of the project set in motion during the two field

trips to Mumbai in 2012 and 2013 respectively.[1] The fifth and final section summarizes the chapter and provides a presentation of the way forward.

A four-fold argumentative framework is generated in the first section of this chapter. I argue: 1) for the inclusion of non-human entities into a social interactional analysis; 2) that relationships and not ontological differences should be the starting point in this analysis; 3) that relations to non-humans are comparable to interhuman ones; and finally, 4) that to enable such a social interactional analysis, a theoretical framework can be built on already existing theories of interhuman relationships.

While present-day Mumbai remains the destination of our itinerary, the broader theme of this book—human relationality—takes us back to early prehistory.

1.2. Relating to non-human entities

This project employs a relational approach to religion by making relationships the main unit of analysis. The motivation to form and propensity to maintain long-term social connections among humans—in particular cooperative relations among individuals in groups—has been crucial for the survival of humans as a species (Dunbar, Knight, and Power 1999; Fessler and Haley 2003). The need to belong is, according to Baumeister and Leary (1995), a cross-cultural "powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive" motivation (497).

The evidence provided so far for such a hypothesis, despite a few references to non-human entities, derives exclusively from inter*human* relationship research. The prototypic exemplar of a relationship in most research on relationships is a dyad with human participants, typically acquainted in physical proximity to each other (Hinde 1976) and engaging in face-to-face interaction (Miell and Dallos 1996).[2] This remains a challenge for the present study because, consequently, human engagement with non-human objects and entities is excluded from social analysis altogether.[3] In sociology, this prototype is, according to Sanders (2006), partly a consequence of the influence of René Descartes and the Cartesian philosophy that perceives animals to be "mindless machines" which, without spoken language, ought not be included into social interactional analysis. Max Weber (1946/1991), a highly influential figure in modern sociology, conceptualized social inter-

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1 The first field trip in 2012 lasted from February 13 to March 25, and the second field trip in 2013 from August 15 to September 4.

2 The "formal study of personal relationship" is an interdisciplinary field born of communication research (Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi 2014, 4).

3 Yet, as anthropologist John L. Caughey shows, some extend their relational aspirations toward celebrities whom they have never met, going well beyond intense interest and veneration involving "imagined conversations, meetings, and extended interactions" (1984, 147).

action as based on mutually referential and socially meaningful action (see Cerulo 2009; von Scheve 2014). In Weber's account, social interaction must entail two or more people, and non-human entities are, at least in principle, ignored as kinds of relational entities.[4]

This overall exclusion is unfortunate as a narrow conceptualization of relationships as it misses out on readily available and compelling evidence of the pervasiveness of the human propensity to relate on a social level and how far into the non-human sphere it extends—from pets to gods, "two of the most commonly anthropomorphized non-human agents" (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007, 875). Instead, humans seem to readily form emotional bonds to a wide variety of non-human objects and entities from robots (Weijers 2013) to plants and insects (Brightman, Grotti, and Ulturgasheva 2012), and—not least—pets. It is time, as Bruno Latour puts it (2005), to let non-human entities "out of their cages" (239).[5] In the following paragraphs, I present a variety of examples of human relations with different kinds of non-human entities.

1.2.1. Pets and robots

Evidence from decades of research within the interdisciplinary study of human-animal interaction suggests that such relationships can produce psychosocial benefits for humans similar to those emerging from interhuman ones.[6] Potentially long-term relationships with animal companions can contribute to the enhancement of both mental and physical health, in particular in relation to provision of social support—a crucial component in human well-being.[7] A main function seems to be the "stress-buffering effect of interacting with an animal who gives non-critical social support" (Hosey and Melfi 2014, 127).

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4 However, Weber did open up to the possibility that (other) *animals* could be included into such an analysis, suggesting that "it would be theoretically possible to formulate a sociology of the relations of men to animals, both domestic and wild. Thus, many animals 'understand' commands, anger, love, hostility, and react to them in ways which are evidently often by no means purely instinctive and mechanical and in some sense both consciously meaningful and affected by experience" (1947/2012, 104).

5 More specifically, to explore "the constant companionship, the continuous intimacy, the inveterate contiguity, the passionate affairs, the convoluted attachments of primates with objects for the past one million years" (Latour 2005, 82).

6 Such studies are often placed under the umbrella of "anthrozoology," originating in the late 1970s. A majority of the studies conducted in this field concern companion animals, with a special focus on dogs (also called "human-canine" bonding). As a field, anthrozoology never developed any theoretical foundation (Hosey and Melfi 2014, 130), but some have attempted to apply Edward O. Wilson's concept of *biophilia* (1984) as a unifying theoretical framework to understand human-animal interactions.

7 See Taylor (2011) for an excellent overview of the social support literature.

Moreover, developmental studies suggest that bonds between humans and animals can function as long-term replacements of interhuman relationships. One longitudinal study shows that children aged twelve who had suffered adversity were more likely to have stronger relationships with their pets than with peers. Furthermore, self-disclosure is one ingredient in personal relationships, and children—in particular girls whose pet was a dog were more likely to disclose private and personal information to their pets than to their siblings (Cassells et al. 2017).

That pets can provide a kind of unconditional support on a stable basis, being unable to disclose private and sensitive information to third parties, is, I suggest, one of the key reasons why human relationships with pets become so encompassing and enduring. In chapter 3, I claim in a more general context that the perceived inadequacy of interhuman relationships—and the search for more complete ones—is central to understanding how and why humans form long-term and meaningful relationships with non-human objects and entities, at least in a cultural context where such relational companions are "available" and supported by immediate social structures, including significant others.

Animal companions are somewhat of an anomaly compared to other non-human entities discussed here in that they are biological entities, often but not always reliant on their human companions for survival. Consequently, they are affected physiologically by interactions with humans, where they establish, according to sociologist Karen A. Cerulo (2009, 544), a "cognitive, affective, and behavioral presence."[8]

Another case of human entanglements with non-human entities are the social connections humans establish to the most rudimentary robot appliances (Forlizzi 2007), let alone human-like robots.[9] Studies show that many, in particular children and elderly people, "act towards artificial companions in perfectly 'social' ways with little differences to interactions with humans" (von Scheve 2014, 74). Sociologist Sherry Turkle and colleagues (2006) note the importance of social integration as a deciding factor, given that seniors losing their ties with friends or family members are more likely to engage in social interaction with robots.[10] Turkle (2007, 2010) reports that many perceive interactions with artificial companions as less stressful, demanding, and exhausting, preferring in many cases interactions with robots to interactions with humans. Robots captivate humans, she asserts, "by asking

8   Several studies on human-dog bonding show that sustained interaction between the two create positive changes in both, such as increased oxytocin levels, and psychophysiological markers in humans similar to when two attached humans relate on a social basis (Nagasawa et al. 2009).
9   Some researchers predict that robots will eventually match the role and impact of biologically alive companion animals (e.g., Floridi 2008).
10 In this regard, humanoid robots are often designed to perform social functions related to health care for elderly people and seem to provide social benefits similar to the ones provided by animal companions (Hosey and Melfi 2014).

for human nurturance, not intelligence. We're suckers not for realism but for relationships" (Turkle, quoted in Allis 2004).

Humans are "suckers" for physically present relationship partners, but at the same time skilled, from an early age, at forming and maintaining relationships with entities *beyond* their physical presence (Boyer 2001). That pets provide social support and confidence mirrors what Marjorie Taylor (1999) finds when investigating the "intense, emotional, and absorbing" (118) relationships children tend to form with imaginary companions, often called pretend friends. In many cases, Taylor reveals, these companions provide the child with the feeling of being loved after being rejected by human peers— functioning as empathic listeners. Connecting on a social and emotional level to such companions can in some cases become a substitute for the lack of positive interhuman relationships (1999, 62–72).[11]

Taylor moreover explains that while such beings are often included into the everyday life of the family in question by adults, children's relationships with imaginary companions remain by and large a private phenomenon and restricted to one age cohort, and possibly also to one particular cultural setting.[12] Humans' relationships with entities typically associated with a religious sphere such as ancestors, spirits, and gods, are one related but cross-cultural phenomenon, not restricted to one age cohort.

1.2.2. Relational religion

In the present study, I theorize religion as relationships (see e.g., Horton 1960; Spiro 1967; Orsi 2005). Such relations are promoted by all religions (Orsi 2005) and are central to religious systems in such diverse traditions as Shintoism (Earhart 1984), Hinduism (Eck 1998; Elgood 1999; Jacobsen 2010), and Evangelical Christianity in America (Luhrmann 2012). The findings presented in this book require present-day Zoroastrianism as practiced in India to be added to that list. Two key assumptions put forward in this book are that the relationships people form with gods and other religious beings are as real and potentially important as interhuman ones (Horton 1960; Rizzuto 1979; Orsi

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11 Contrary to popular belief, Taylor argues, such relationships are not a sign of confusion over the distinction between reality and imagination, and "very young children are somehow able to understand such acts as pretense" (1999, 89). Taylor also shows, again contrary to popular belief, that the same children tend to perform better than others on a number of different experimental tasks measuring such diverse things as attention, IQ, and theory of mind tasks (39–47).

12 Taylor's study focuses largely on North American material, where at least 30% of the children asked report having or having had one or several imaginary companions during childhood and suggests that the results might be "specific to Western culture" (1999, 115). In a study on imaginary friends among Indian children, Taylor found that "when Indian children talk to entities that adults cannot perceive, the entity is referred to as invisible rather than imaginary. The assumption is that the child is communicating with a very real being who exists on a spiritual realm or is part of the child's past life" (116).

2005; Luhrmann 2012), and that these relationships share the same basic properties as those between humans despite the fact that the relationship partner in question differs from an ontological point of view. A similar argument has been made by anthropologist Robin Horton (1960), who postulates that religion is the "extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society" (211). Horton focuses particularly on the parallels between such relationships by arguing that behavior in interhuman and "religious relationships" exists in a continuum from flexible to highly stereotyped behavior. The latter, Horton claims, characterizes religious relationships where the actions and potential feedback from gods during interaction is "inaccessible to observation" (1960, 208). A key difference, then, is the unpredictable nature (or lack) of responsiveness and the impact this has on attempts at relating to non-human entities.

A second continuum exists, suggests Horton (1960), between "pure communion" and "pure manipulation" (212). The former implies that a person's actions are directed at "manipulating the gods as tools for the achievement of health, [and] wealth" (219), and the latter "entirely towards obtaining certain responses in alter which he values intrinsically and towards giving certain responses to alter whose discharge is of similar intrinsic value to him" (212). Theorizing the parallels between interhuman and what he terms "religious relationships" on the basis of this continuum is helpful in that it highlights motivation as a key variable. Absent from Horton's theorizing, and included in the present study, is the attempt to move beyond the general level in order to explore individual differences as well as draw attention to general characteristics and mechanisms involved when such relationships are formed.

While Horton focuses on the parallels based on a comparison, a related yet different approach is to investigate how interhuman relations influence people's bonding with gods and other non-human entities in more direct ways. A main topic in a wide range of psychodynamic approaches[13] to religion is how interhuman relationships—especially those among children and their primary caregivers—have an effect on the formation of relationships with gods.[14]

In exploring such relationships, a widely deployed psychodynamic approach is attachment theory (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990; Kirkpatrick 2005); a psychological theory originally developed by John Bowlby (1969) to understand people's social development from infants to young adults.

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13 See Granqvist (2006) for a review of the link between attachment theory to religion and more traditional psychodynamic approaches.
14 Psychodynamic approaches are here used as an umbrella term referring to theoretical approaches originating from Sigmund Freud's initial ideas on human personality, focusing on the distinction and interplay between conscious and subconscious processes in the mind, and their effect on human personality and mentality (despite the fact that some newer psychodynamic approaches reject much of the early psychoanalytical framework).

Attachment is thought to have evolved as a behavioral system in humans and other primates to enable the maintenance of proximity between infants and their primary caregivers, "with the ultimate purpose of protection of helpless infants from environmental dangers such as predators" (Kirkpatrick 2005, 28). Specifically, attachment theory is applied to religious material in which "perceptions of having a personal relationship with a parent-like deity" could be understood, according to Kirkpatrick (2005), as a manifestation of the attachment system.[15] This hypothesis rests on the assumption that some interhuman relationships among adults can "function psychologically, at least in part, as attachments" (2005, 39). The present study shares a similar focus in exploring to what extent interhuman relationships impact relations with non-human entities (and vice versa). However, it does not utilize this particular theoretical framework because attachment theory is limited by focusing on one distinct type of relationship, "where one stronger and wiser individual is discriminated from others as being the primary provider of security in stressful situations" (Granqvist 2006, 13). Consequentially, the framework by extension limits its focus to one specific kind of relationship, typically one with representations of the Judeo-Christian god. Instead, the present approach investigates the relationships humans form with non-human entities such as gods from a broader perspective by applying several theoretical and methodological approaches on the empirical case.

Theoretical approaches to relationships with non-human beings in the sphere of religion have by and large centered on how and why people relate on a social level to *invisible* non-human entities. Continuously burning Zoroastrian temple fires are the main object of study in this book. In many religions—Zoroastrianism included—a wide range of objects, from statues to fires, are perceived to be important manifestations, representations, representatives, or embodiments of invisible gods—gods that are available for relationships, but only through such intermediaries. As Alfred Gell (1998) rightly points out, in no other context are "images more obviously treated as human persons than in the context of worship and ceremonies" (6).

Amy Whitehead's (2013) study on how people relate to the statues of the Virgin of Alcala and Glastonbury Goddess share parallels to the present study in at least two important ways. Firstly, comparable to how statues are treated in Hindu temples,[16] Whitehead shows how these statues go from being treated as objects to *subjects* of devotion. Secondly, the personal relationships between worshippers and the statues are formed on the basis of ritualized gift

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15 The combination of a psychodynamic with an *evolutionary* perspective distinguishes attachment theory from other psychodynamic approaches like object-relations theory. The two kinds of approaches still share the basic assumption that experiences in early relationships shape subsequent behavior and social relations.

16 In the case of Hinduism, statues are treated as divine guests through actions like bathing, feeding, and honoring—all actions facilitating "the close relationship of the worshipper and God" (Eck 1998, 46).

exchanges. My approach differs from Whitehead's, however, in the way relationships are conceptualized and operationalized. In Whitehead's analysis, relationships are typically described as temporary and momentary events, emerging "*only in moments* of active relating" (2013, 181). Such a conceptualization is limiting to the present analysis. In the following paragraphs, I provide an operationalization of "relationship(s)" sensitive to both cultural and individual differences, construed in a way receptive to the fact that the relational partner in question does not respond within known human categories, while at the same time being similar enough to enable a comparative analysis between humans, and in this case, between humans and temple fires.

1.2.3. Beyond mere interaction: operationalizing relationships

Wilmot (1995) likens a relationship to a dance to describe how social proximity varies in social relations—sometimes close, sometimes distant—in addition to capture the "form, flow, challenges, [and] disruptions" of relationships (21). Some might argue that important ingredients in (successful) dancing are synchronic movements as a result of the execution of a set of similar intentions between two (or in some cases, more) participants. Contrary to most other definitions of social relationships (see e.g., Duck 1988; Wilmot 1995), I contend that a relationship, more than a property, is a kind of narrative (see below) constructed by one individual on the basis of interaction, requiring no implicit or explicit social contract or agreement between two (or more) entities to exist as such. Interaction exists if and when an individual believes that she or he is interacting with someone (Fiske 1991; Cerulo 2009).

Interaction is a basic ingredient in relationships as operationalized here. Hinde (1976) defines interaction as a sequence of action(s) where individual *A* "shows behavior *X* to individual *B* or *A* shows *X* to *B* and *B* responds with *T*" (2). This definition has heuristic value for the present analysis in that it highlights how sequences of action are not *dependent* on a response (from participant *B*) to be classified as interactions.

An important sub-type of interaction related to the present case is *exchange*, defined here as a sequence between two (or more) participants comprising two main steps. In dyadic exchanges, participant *A* triggers the sequence when transmitting something—typically a social, material, or non-material resource—to participant *B*. The second step (potentially) ends the sequence with participant *B* returning a social, material, or symbolic resource to participant *A*. Importantly, and in line with the premise stated above, the second step is fulfilled if and when participant *A* believes that participant *B* has reciprocated something as a response to the initial resource given.

Another sub-type of interaction is *communication*, referring to an interaction sequence where one participant *A* conveys information of any

sort to a target entity *B* without specifying whether or not a response is needed or expected. Communicative acts often come in the form of a written or spoken message to a receiver and are typically orally transmitted. Non-verbalized communication, for example mediated by bodily postures, is also relevant in our specific case, as the following chapters will show.[17]

Interaction among humans is inescapably a highly interpretive process, and the difficulty in deciphering both oral or written statements and body language makes misrecognition and interpretation inevitable. While some non-human entities, such as pets and human-like robots, provide visible cues transparent for third-party observers as well, interaction with religious entities complicate this process further, being based on internal cues (often an interpretation of some external event); cues which are in the next step treated as signs or answers from the entity in question.

Turning to relationships, they are formed through "*repeated* interactions" (Wilmot 1995, 19). Hinde (1976) emphasizes the same temporal element by arguing that interaction sequences, in order to be labeled relationships, must have a degree of continuity between "the successive interactions" (38). Thus, each sequence and its outcome will, at least principally, have consequences for future interaction sequences. This idea is closely connected to Berscheid and Peplau's (1983) concept of "behavioral interdependence," referring to the degree of how "one person's behavior somehow affects the other person's behavior and vice versa" (6).

Taken together, human interactions with non-human entities can fruitfully be analyzed as relationships if: 1) interaction sequences are repeated, and 2) participant *A* alters her or his behavior due to an interpreted response by target entity *B* and/or speculates that target entity *B* is altering responses because of participant *A*'s actions. I refer to these as basic relationships to distinguish them from personal relationships.

Relationships to divine beings exist, as anthropologist Michael Carrithers (2000) rightly points out, on a continuum from close to distant in relation to how frequently they are interacted with, where "some relationships … might be as close as family, others as distant as a medical specialist once visited" (835). I define *personal relationships* as extensions of basic relationships.

Four additional elements characterize personal relationships as defined here.[18] Firstly, a distinct *interaction pattern* is formed as a consequence of frequent interaction between the relational entities in focus. Secondly, personal relationships include personal *self-disclosure*, a crucial form of interpersonal communication (Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi 2014). Thirdly,

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17 Communication is either conflated with, or seen as a crucial sub-class of, interaction. Definitions of communication also suffer from the mentioned bias in relationship analysis to presuppose two (or more) *human* participants in a process of reciprocal interchange (e.g., Katz and Kahn 1966; Wilmot 1995, 21).

18 The boundaries between the two types of relationship are not meant to be watertight. Thus, basic relationships can include components of interpersonal ones.
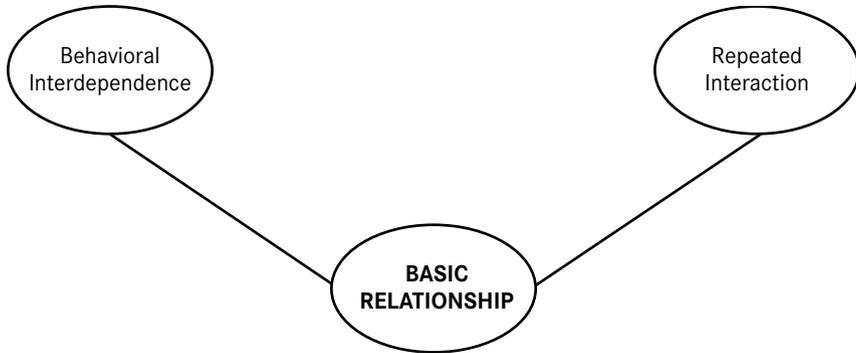
Figure 1: Components of a "basic relationship."

such relations involve an attachment at an *emotional* (as opposed to instrumental) level. The fourth and final component of personal relationships is that a *relational history*, or a narrative account of the relationship and its evolution, is created. In interhuman relationships, such relational histories typically contain shared stories about when and how the interaction commenced and commonly include important episodes in their formative phase.[19]

Humans (continuously) revise and evaluate their human relationships, either by themselves, in conversations with the relational partner in question, or with third parties (e.g., family members). In the present analysis, and in interviews with respondents, such relational meta-talk comprises the starting point of analysis, where the third party was myself—the ethnographical outsider.

As noted above, relationships as conceptualized here are not social things or a property of two individuals but rather narratives that individuals create to "organize and synthesize a jumbled set of events into an understandable sequence" (Wilmot 1995, 24). In dyadic interhuman relationships, both participants create such relational accounts: Narratives that can be discussed with the partner, providing "an opportunity for mutual understanding" by bringing them into line (Hinde 1976, 40); narratives which are subject to change. It was those narratives, if they existed at all, that I tried to tap into when exploring respondents' social connections with the consecrated fires in Parsi fire temples.

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19 In relation to the connection between religion and interaction, scholar of religion Hans Penner's (1989) definition of religion comes to mind: "Religion is a verbal and non-verbal structure of interaction with superhuman being(s)" (7).
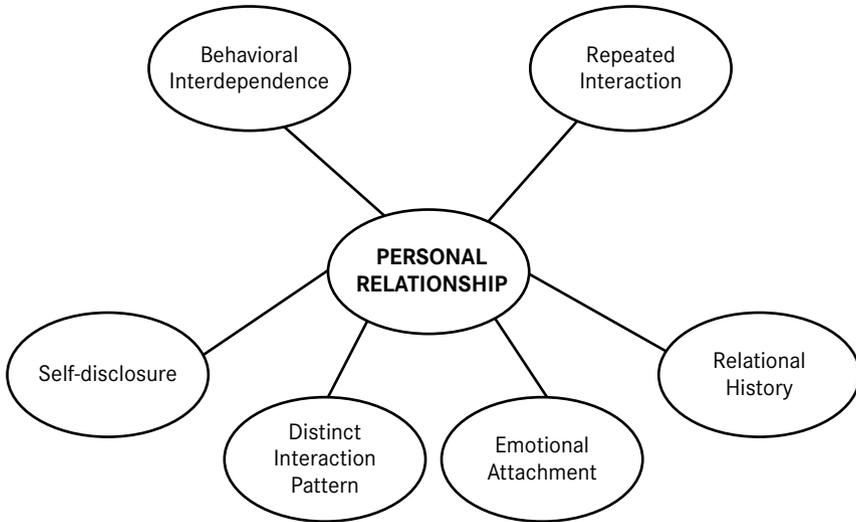
Figure 2: Components of a "personal relationship."

1.2.4. Relational models

In the preparations for the first field trip, I engaged with Relational Models theory (RMt), a theory of relationships developed by anthropologist Alan P. Fiske (1991, 1992; Fiske and Haslam 2005). I wanted to make use of the theory to explore to what extent respondents' relationships with temple fires, when they occur, are idiosyncratic. More specifically, I wanted to scrutinize whether or not there are distinct ways of relating to non-human entities and—if so—what kind of cultural and cognitive resources humans draw on to establish, act out, and make sense of such relationships.

The main assumption of the RMt is that four basic and fundamental relational models (or a combination thereof) organize most aspects of human sociality across cultures. These are communal sharing (CS), authority ranking (AR), equality matching (EM), and market pricing (MP).

When people share communally (CS), they treat each other as equal based on responsibilities and sentiments of kindness and generosity. In interhuman relationships, the theory suggests, people indicate that they are equal through assimilation, where prominent examples are "nursing, feeding, commensal eating and drinking … caressing, cuddling, sexual relations, and synchronous movement" (Fiske and Schubert 2012, 173). The core experience in communal sharing, the theory goes, is the "feeling of closeness and oneness" (174). When people relate according to authority (AR), they construe the relational partner as differing in social importance or status, where one important social factor is

whether one person feels superior or inferior to the other. A typical ranking action is bowing, evoking "in themselves and in the persons to whom they bow certain emotions specific to AR" (Fiske and Schubert 2012, 175). Thirdly, when people organize relating according to equality matching (EM), the key question is whether interaction is based on reciprocity and fair exchange. Finally, when people price (MP), individuals interact with others based on cost-benefit ratios and rational calculations of efficiency or expected utility (Fiske 1992).

The main utility of these models in a social context is that they function as tools to judge different features of social action and anticipate different facts of interactions, as well as to coordinate with people. Importantly, while people typically construe themselves as being *in* relationships, these models are not "bins in which dyads and groups can be sorted" (Fiske and Schubert 2012, 172); rather, these models are ways of relating. Thus, people are not *in* an "EM relationship," but rather "generate some aspect of their action, or interpret and evaluate some aspect of an interaction" with reference to the model in question (172).

Fiske (1991) suggests that these four basic relational models also organize religious thought and behavior (127–129). A number of religious traditions, for example Sufism and different *bhakti* movements in Hinduism (Jacobsen 2010), promote unity with and closeness to God as a main devotional goal (i.e., CS). With regard to interaction based on an AR model, gods are often perceived to be superior to men and treated accordingly (Burkert 1998). Central to *puja*, for example, is showing obeisance to a superior person, through "an inclination or prostration of the body" (Carrithers 2000, 835). A kind of EM relation characterizes humans' relationships to deities, according to Morgan (2005), who says that offerings usher people into a "form of an economy of exchange that allows believers to enter into a relationship with deities … intended to result in mutual satisfaction" (59). A key feature of religion, for Stark and Finke (2000), is social exchanges with gods and other supernatural beings. Within such exchanges, they claim, humans tend to "seek to minimize their religious costs" by searching for "cheap" gods (278–279), similar to how MP interaction is coordinated. To be of use for the present study, the RMt was utilized and operationalized in a specific way (see below).

By way of summary, so far I have shown that humans form social and emotional bonds with a wide variety of non-human entities. The studies reviewed suggest that such relationships are potentially comparable to interhuman ones, such as when they generate similar, and in some cases, superior physical and psychological benefits.

Besides providing conceptual clarification of key terms, an analytical vocabulary has been developed to be of use in the following analysis, in particular the re-presentation of four respondents' subjective life accounts presented in the upcoming chapter. I outlined fundamental ingredients of

basic and personal relationships and the distinction between the two. I *modified* definitions taken from the study of interhuman relationships to make an analysis of relationships with non-humans feasible.

A *basic* relationship refers to a situation when repeated interaction between participants where each sequence and its outcome will, at least principally, have consequences for and in future interaction chains. *Personal* relationships are more elaborate versions of basic relationships, including: a distinct interaction pattern, elements of personal self-disclosure, attachment at an emotional level, and the formation of a relational history. Finally, in the following, "relating" is used as a broad umbrella term. It points both to interaction and the emotional reactions such interactions create and usher, in addition to more meta-relational processes such as thinking and talking about relationships. A total of ten research questions emerge from this theoretical discussion:

2. Do people form basic relationships (as defined above) with non-human entities?
3. Do people form personal relationships (as defined above) with non-human entities?
4. What characterizes such relationships?
5. To what extent are they idiosyncratic?
6. Are there different kinds of relationships?
7. How is interaction structured?
8. What are the parallels between human–non-human relationships and interhuman ones?
9. To what extent do interhuman relationships influence relationships with non-human entities (and vice versa)?
10. Which factors and processes contribute to the formation of such relationships?
11. Why do people want (or need) such relationships?

I call these *theoretical* research questions since they do not begin with a particular religion or an empirical case but rather emerged from a theoretical discussion. By making a theoretical issue the starting point of analysis, the present project departs from a majority of research projects in the study of religion (Stausberg and Engler 2011). That does not imply that the empirical case was chosen randomly. The worship of fires among Zoroastrian Parsis in present-day India, in particular Mumbai, comprises the empirical case to explore these theoretical questions. In the upcoming paragraphs, I provide a presentation of Zoroastrianism and the Parsis, place the study in its right theoretical and methodological frame (i.e., everyday religion), and provide preliminary reasons for why I chose Parsi Zoroastrianism, and perceptions of the temple fires in particular, as a case study to illuminate when, how, and potentially why people readily establish relationships with non-human entities.

1.3. Present-day Parsi Zoroastrianism in India

1.3.1. Who are the Parsi Zoroastrians?

The term "Parsi Zoroastrianism" has two components: one ethnic and one religious. In scholarship on contemporary Zoroastrianism, these two are often intermingled. Indian Parsis self-identify as descendants of Iranian Zoroastrians.[20] Zoroastrianism is often traced back to prehistory, to the semi-historical figure of Zarathustra and the Eurasian steppes, where he supposedly lived sometime between 1200 and 800 BCE.[21]

Reportedly a priest's son (see e.g., Hintze 2012), Zarathustra became known as a prophet and founder of Zoroastrianism to generations upon generations of Zoroastrians. Little can be stated with certainty about the early developments of the religion, where the primary source to reconstructions of early Zoroastrianism is the Avesta, a large corpus of texts composed in Old and Younger Avestan.[22]

Like Hinduism, early Zoroastrianism was orally transmitted for many centuries through Avestan words in the form of ritual formulas, songs, and prayers to be recited or sung by laity and schooled priests. According to Stausberg (2015), these not-yet-texts must have existed at least before 300 BCE, and some must be even older. Despite being somewhat neglected (Skjærvø 2011, 319), the oral character of the tradition continues to be an integral part of religious practice in the present-day Parsi community, where priests' main occupation is recitation of Avestan prayers during rituals and ceremonies (a majority of which are performed in dedication of "the departed souls") (Stausberg 2010b, 282). To many Parsis, and not only to priests, the oral tradition of reciting sacred words creates continuity and a point of reference to what is seen as a glorious ancient past. This impression is reinforced by a perception that Zoroastrianism was the state religion of three

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20 Iran is still appreciated by many as the "homeland" of Zoroastrianism, a religion to which many Parsis adhere. A "return" to the country, at least in its current politico-religious climate, was not a stated goal for most of my respondents. Package tours to Iran promoted as pilgrimages (both by tour operators and the travelers themselves) are growing in popularity, where the main attraction is a visit to some of the older fire temples (or places of worship)—Yazd in particular. Several of my respondents who had gone on such trips mentioned the so-called "flying fires" (said to move from tree to tree and persist without wood or fuel), but most of them were rather secretive about the matter.

21 Four chapters (1–4) in the *Routledge Companion to Zoroastrianism* (2015) are entirely devoted to the subject of Zarathustra.

22 It was Anquetil-Duperron, a Western scholar, in cooperation with Parsi priests, who first collected a large corpus of Avestan texts. No complete manuscript of the *Avesta* exists, but among most Parsi Zoroastrians, the *Avesta* bears the status of a "holy" or "sacred" *book*, something Hinnells (2005) suggests is the consequence of the impact of the so-called "religions of the book" combined with the influence of Western scholarship.

Persian empires, a notion shared by some Western scholars (e.g., Boyce 1979; Kreyenbroek 2001).

Having developed in Iran in the first millennium of its growth, undergoing its formative phase during the Sasanid Empire (de Jong 2015), Zoroastrianism was eventually brought to India by a group of migrants now called the Parsis. The early Zoroastrians migrated in pockets mainly to the northwestern region of present-day India between the Arabic invasion of Persia, which ended the Sasanid Empire, and the 11th century.[23] Other Iranians settled in India after the Sasanian period, but those were not Parsis.

Before the European colonial trading powers reached India in the early 17th century, Parsis lived as agrarians, artisans, and small-scale mercantilists (Hinnells and Williams 2007, 1). From the 17th century onwards, Parsis began to migrate from other parts of India to Mumbai (then called Bombay),[24] a collection of seven islands which became a major trading city in the mid-18th century, largely due to Parsi enterprise as shipbuilders, weavers, and agent brokers working for the East India Company in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. From the late 18th to the early 20th century, new groups of Zoroastrians, now commonly referred to as Iranis, migrated from Iran and settled in the Indian subcontinent; they often bear the surname "Irani." During the British Raj, the Parsis increased in numbers, economic power, and social influence, becoming "pioneers in colonial India" (Hinnells and Williams 2007, 2).[25]

The present study places itself within the study of contemporary Parsi Zoroastrianism. The study of contemporary Zoroastrianism is, Stausberg (2008a, 587) states, one of the most under-researched areas of study. India has long since been the main area of Zoroastrianism, where the majority of the estimated Zoroastrian world population of 60,000–80,000 now lives. Zoroastrian population density is particularly high on the west coast of Maharashtra and Gujarat, and especially in and around Mumbai.[26] Mumbai is the capital city of the state of Maharashtra. With an estimate of more than 20 million inhabitants, it is the most populous city in India.

In the post-colonial context, Parsis enjoy a high degree of social mobility and the nation's highest literacy rate. Many Parsis are not only well versed in

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23 Scholars have recently argued that trade was a crucial factor (Wink 2002; Hinnells 2015a).

24 In 1995, the city officially changed its name from Bombay to Mumbai, a name linked to Mumbadevi, a goddess associated with Hinduism. Many of its inhabitants, including many Parsis, continue to use the old name.

25 Many Parsis to whom I spoke expressed a certain ambivalence related to this part of their long history in India, a period bringing both fame and access to opportunities unheard of before the Raj, but at the same time close ties to colonial powers. For a critical analysis of the Parsis in post-colonial times, see Luhrmann 1996.

26 In the long aftermath of the conquest of Iran by Arab forces, Zoroastrianism was reduced "from a diffuse and partly dominant majority religion to a compact subordinate religious minority" (Stausberg 2015, 173). Zoroastrianism in Iran now counts around 20,000 adherents.

scholarly literature but also highly educated; a total of 30–40% of Parsis in middle-to-upper-class Indian society have a university degree (Hinnells 2005, 49). From a demographical point of view, the group's numbers are declining owing to several factors, most notably low childbirth rates[27] and the increasing number of intermarriages where the person marrying a non-Parsi is no longer classified as a Parsi.[28] This exclusion is considered deeply discriminative by many Parsis, including several of my respondents. A male Parsi, and by extension his children, are by most considered legitimate members of the community (if he marries a non-Parsi), while a woman and her children lose both social recognition and status as legitimate members if she marries a non-Parsi—in addition to being excluded from the two main religious spaces: the funerary structures (Av. *dakmha*s, often called the Towers of Silence) and the fire temples.

Mumbai is commonly described as a cultural melting pot, and Hinnells (2005) suggests that a general feature of religion in the megacity is the "absence of barriers" (110). While it is hard to avoid exposure to so-called non-Zoroastrian religious practices and beliefs on such a multicultural scene (Stausberg 2004b, 715), there are plenty of barriers between religions. As such, Zoroastrianism as practiced in India is an illustrative example in that non-Zoroastrians are denied access to all important religious places and participation in rituals. As I suggest in chapter 3, a more realistic way to characterize religious culture in Mumbai and other parts of South Asia is *polytropy* (Carrithers 2000). I present examples of how non-Zoroastrians work around these barriers by having Parsis offer sandalwood to the fires for them, and how many Parsi Zoroastrians turn "outward" to so-called non-Zoroastrian beings to find solace and seek divine help.

Many Parsis maintain their ethnic identity through markers such as dress, customs, cuisine, festival participation, and storytelling. Iranis preserve their own distinct traditions such as "language (dialect), narratives, and some religious practices" (Stausberg 2015, 174). During the ritual of initiation (PGuj. *navjote*), the girl or boy is invested with a sacred undershirt (Pers. *sudre*), which they are expected to wear at all times as a symbol of their commitment to Zoroastrianism, in addition to a sacred cord (Pers. *kusti*) to be tied/untied during the *padyab-kusti* (Pers.), the basic rite of purification (Stausberg and Karanjia 2015, 373). Wearing the *sudre* and *kusti* remains for many an important marker of identity, either religious or ethnic or both.

Most Western scholars primarily see Parsi identity as a religious entity. Yet, not all Parsis self-identify as religious; secularism grew quickly within the

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27 It is mainly younger people who have migrated. Consequentially, unlike Mumbai, "the diaspora communities have a higher birth than death rate" (Hinnells 2015b, 205).

28 This was a recurring theme spontaneously brought up during the fieldwork interviews as a topic of great concern for many of my respondents—an issue affecting social ties within and sometimes between families (see e.g., Arnaz, chapter 2.2).

group in the 19th and the 20th century respectively (Luhrmann 1996, 108). It is my clear impression that atheism has been on the rise over the last decades—especially among the younger members of the community.[29]

Regardless, as this study seeks to explore people's perceptions of non-human beings as relational entities, the following paragraphs provide a short overview of the divine landscape of Zoroastrianism; beings to which, as we will see, respondents turn for solace and divine help.

1.3.2. Divine beings in Zoroastrianism

An array of benevolent divine beings and malevolent demonic entities characterize Zoroastrianism. From a linguistics perspective, the *Old Avesta* comprises the oldest texts in the Avestan corpus. The *Gatha*s, the oldest primary source of Zoroastrianism, are of paramount importance for Zoroastrians (Andrés-Toledo 2015). The *Gatha*s consist of five songs or hymns believed by many adherents as well as some Western scholars (e.g., Boyce 1989) to be the actual utterances of Zarathustra. They constitute the basis upon which scholars of Zoroastrianism reconstruct early Zoroastrianism, particularly the life, homeland, and teachings of Zarathustra.

A main motif in the Old Avestan texts is the cosmic battle between evil forces and good forces, later (in Younger Avestan texts) personified by the twin spirits *Angra Mainyu* (Av.) and *Spenta Mainyu* (Av.) The former entity, nowadays called Ahreman (Pahl.), is the evil spirit and demon of demons (Vd. xix, 1, 43).[30] Together with his army of demons, a main figure being *Druj nasu* (Av., "Lie"), the (female) corpse demon, Ahreman, attempts to destroy the Creations of *Spenta Mainyu*—the protagonist and leader of the forces of Good, later identified with Ahura Mazda ("The Wise Lord")—upholding and engendering the cosmic order.[31] Ahura Mazda is the omniscient[32] and omnibenevolent supreme god and gravitational point of the more than a hundred divine beings mentioned in the Avestan texts (Stausberg 2010a, 139).[33]

The main task for Ahura Mazda is to uphold the true/real cosmic order by avoiding and countering continuous attacks from Ahreman and his demons.

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29 Most, but not all, the respondents in this study self-identified as religious but were, as one might expect, subject to great variation in their stated degree of religiosity and religious practice.

30 The most common Avestan epithets attributed to Ahreman are "evil-thinking," "deceitful," and "fiendish" (Gray 1930, 177).

31 *Druj* is the polar opposite of *Asha* (Av., "truth" or "righteousness").

32 In textual sources, Lüddeckens and Karanjia (2011) note, "positions differ with regard to his omnipotence" (42).

33 Ahura Mazda is commonly anthropomorphized with eyes (*Y.* 45, 4), hands (*Y.* 43, 4), and tongue (*Y.* 31, 3), and is at the same time considered "all-perceiving," "undeceivable," and "all-knowing" (Gray 1930, 19–22).

Six divine beings, the *Amesha spenta*s ("Life-Giving Immortals"), represent and protect Ahura Mazda's most important creations, the seven elements, by coordinating the battle. Each *Amesha spenta* is associated with or "represents a mental quality or concept which man can cultivate" (Kreyenbroek 2001, 5).

The earliest textual references to fire in Zoroastrian scriptures derive from the *Gatha*s. In *Yasna Haptanghaiti* (Av., "Worship in Seven Chapters"), a set of seven Old Avestan hymns in the *Yasna* collection, fire is regarded as "a 'most holy spirit'" (Choksy and Kotwal 2005, 227). Fire (Av. *Atar*, Pahl. *Atash*) is personified by *Asha vahishta* (Av., "Best Truth")—often *Ardibehesht* (Pers.) in present-day parlance—a being "associated with truth, righteousness and order," and guardian of the element and creation of fire (Lüddeckens and Karanjia 2011, 44). Fire is furthermore classified as a *Yazad* (Pahl., "[Being] Worthy of Worship"), another group of divine helpers in Ahura Mazda's fight against the evil forces. Though mentioned only once in the *Old Avesta*, where it refers to Ahura Mazda (Skjærvø 2011, 346), the *Young Avesta* introduces the *Yazad*s as divine beings with distinct individual profiles and functions (Stausberg 2008b, 30). Anahita, Mithra, and Sraosha are among the more prominent ones (Skjærvø 2011, 346).

In a contemporary context, such divine entities are called upon and praised with the recitation of prayers such as the *yasht*s, hymns invoking different divine beings—be it the *Amesha spenta*s or one of the *Yazad*s. It is sometimes assumed that despite the prevalence and importance of such divine entities in religious texts, many of them are of little importance in the day-to-day life of contemporary Zoroastrians in India. Thus, Skjærvø (2011) claims that they have "lost their individual divine character and are worshipped not for themselves but as god's creations or have been reinterpreted as allegories or symbols" (350), while Choksy and Kotwal (2005) similarly contend that the *Amesha spenta*s "have become angelic entities of more limited relevance to daily life" (244).[34] The findings of this study suggest otherwise, as will be shown later.

Due to Ahura Mazda's prominent position in theology and practice, monotheism remains the favored classification of Zoroastrianism, both by Western scholars and by Zoroastrians themselves (Boyd and Crosby 1979; Stausberg 2002; Kreyenbroek 2006). However, the number of gods and other divine beings (or concepts) and their conflicts attested in textual sources is but one of several reasons why Zoroastrianism has been classified as a dualism (Henning 1956; Skjærvø 2005), polytheism (Skjærvø 2005), panentheism or pantheism (see Rose 2011, 32), or kathenotheism (Boyce 1989). Skjærvø opts

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34 The *Amesha Spenta*s are often classified as archangels and the *Yazad*s as angels, both by Western scholars and by Zoroastrians—one of several examples of how Christian concepts, or rather conceptions of Christianity, have influenced modern Zoroastrian self-conceptions. Another example is how Ahura Mazda in many contexts "often displays a strikingly close affinity with Christian conceptions" (Lüddeckens and Karanjia 2011, 42).

for a multimodal option, contending that Zoroastrianism is "a dualistic and polytheistic religion, but with one supreme god, who is the father of the ordered cosmos" (2005, 15)—adding in a footnote that "such systems are also called *henotheistic*" (15).

Physical fires, in the form of hearth fires and sacrificial fires, have been an integral element in Zoroastrian practice throughout its history. Mary Boyce, a leading Western scholar of Zoroastrianism,[35] (1989) claims that the Indo-Iranians before Zarathustra had worshipped the hearth fire "as a god within the home" (68), and Albert de Jong (1997) considers it likely that the ritual tending and gathering around the sacrificial fire are among its original elements (see also Hintze 2002, 48; Stewart 2007, 63).[36] In early Zoroastrianism, Skjærvø (2005) suggests, the sacrificial fire functioned as the intermediary in the gift exchange between humans and gods by conveying prayers and transferring offerings to the gods and bringing blessings back to the worshippers.

Historically, the offering to the fire included a portion of the flesh or fat from a ritually slaughtered animal, a practice which was abandoned in India during the 19th and 20th centuries (Stausberg and Karanjia 2015, 365). Nowadays, Parsis go to the fire temple and offer dry and fragrant wood and praise to the fire, and in doing so take part in worshippers' ritualized gift exchanges involving the temple fires, as will be elaborated in chapter 3.

The following paragraphs outline my *everyday* approach to contemporary Parsi Zoroastrianism, followed by a discussion of why the main focus in this study has been people's subjective perceptions of the consecrated temple fires.

1.3.3. Religion in the everyday

Historically, a text-and-language-oriented focus on the ancient scriptural tradition has been the main interest of scholars in the academic study of Zoroastrianism (Kreyenbroek 2001, vii), reflecting a similar emphasis in the study of religion(s) more broadly (Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2012). A study of religion based on a text-and-language-grounded approach typically reflects the lives of religious specialists and experts in a given tradition, being preoccupied with texts themselves. Consequently, the religious lives of non-specialists are often downplayed or even ignored.[37] The dichotomies of elite/

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35 In the *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism* (2015), Stausberg and Vevaina write that Boyce is "the first Western academic who can be qualified as a Zoroastrian scholar per se" (12).

36 According to tradition, three Great (or Royal) fires of ancient Iran have existed since creation, deriving directly from Ahura Mazda (Boyce 1983).

37 The re-focus from texts and beliefs to practiced religion has been called the "performative turn," as religions were "no longer thought of as belief systems but as more or less coherent assem-

folk, official/unofficial, and normative/popular religion have been developed on the basis of such eschewed research agendas—dichotomies which create a conception of two qualitatively different modes of religious belief and behavior. Problems arise when these are applied on religious materials on the basis of an underlying assumption of a hierarchical relationship between the two—for example between the "pure religious doctrine of the specialists vs. the syncretistic practice of the ordinary people" (Schielke and Debevec 2012, 4)—thus favoring one group's religion over another.[38] The "everyday" approach to religion, established to come to terms with such an imbalanced perspective on religion, can be traced back to the book *Lived Religion in America* (Hall 1997).[39]

For the study of Zoroastrianism, Hinnells (2000) suggests that Mary Boyce made the first substantial attempt to study daily life and practice alongside the vast text tradition by emphasizing what he calls the "domestic dimension" of the religion and de-focusing "the male-dominated priestly tradition" (20).[40] Critical of Boyce, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina (unpublished manuscript)[41] argues that much of her work was an attempt to respond to the typical vantage point of orientalists treating (ancient) religion as practiced in contemporary communities as "detritus" from the purer (and more ancient) version of the religion, while at the same time retaining the distinction between pure/impure and authentic/inauthentic when she, in her eagerness "not to see living Zoroastrianism as a 'distortion'," attempts to demonstrate that Zoroastrians in Yazd "were so orthodox that their beliefs and practices had largely remained unchanged" (5). Vevaina concludes that only those among "the living communities who conform to her predetermined standard of orthodoxy are seen as living an 'authentic' form of Zoroastrianism" (5).

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blages of things to be done materially, as embodied and spatial processes that constitute social reality" (Stausberg and Karanjia 2015, 363).

38 The approach implies special attention to the quotidian rather than the ceremonial religious practice (often at the expense of belief), the role of the body, material dimensions of religion, and the relation between the secular and religious. The approach combines methodological and theoretical assumptions. From a methodological perspective, such an approach leans on anthropology, ethnography, and other "cultural approaches," demonstrating the reflexive turn in these and related disciplines, and in particular "qualitative, interview-based research" (Townsend 2012, 178). Moreover, proponents of such approaches often include a certain position in relation to the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer, exemplified by Robert Orsi's (2005) middle ground or "third way" between a "confessional or theological scholarship" and "radically secular scholarship" (198).

39 While the "lived religion" and "everyday religion" approaches could be separated for analytical purposes, I have decided for the sake of simplicity to refer to both approaches under the umbrella of an "everyday approach" to religion.

40 Yet, the 18th-century French orientalist Abraham Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) included a detailed ethnographic account of Zoroastrians living in India (Stausberg 1998; Stausberg and Vevaina 2015).

41 Vevaina, Y. S.-D. "Surely the prophet intended …": Authority and legitimation in the study of Zoroastrianism. Unpublished paper.

Seen from this perspective, Boyce's approach resonates with early scholarly discourse on "popular religion," or the study of the "religious beliefs, practices, and identities of 'everyday folks'" (Townsend 2012, 173), ultimately supporting the priesthood's claim to the power of defining (in)authentic Zoroastrianism.

The discourse on "popular religion" emerged from an eagerness to shift focus from elite religion to the religious practice of such ordinary folks but ended up favoring this group's practice as "*more 'authentic' expressions of religion*" (Townsend 2012, 173). In contrast to the popular religion discourse, the everyday approach to religion makes the religious lives of *both* specialists and non-specialists relevant and examples of "'everyday' parts of religion *as lived*" (173).

Sociological approaches tend to favor, or rather emphasize, the religion of "the ordinary people that happens beyond the bounds and often without the approval of religious authorities" (Ammerman 2007, 2; see also McGuire 1998). Religious specialists are often made analytically relevant in relation to ordinary people's religion, or, in the words of Ammerman (2007), "once they get used by someone other than a professional" (5). Contra Ammerman, the present study approaches everyday religion more in line with anthropological approaches which include both religious specialists and non-specialists, focusing both on the domestic and the temple sphere instead of solely on activities happening outside organized religious institutions and events.

Some sociological approaches take for granted a high degree of tension between the everyday practice of non-specialists and the normative doctrines of specialists. Anthropological approaches tend to focus more on "the complex duality" (Schielke and Debevec 2012, 1; Harvey 2013). In the present study, attention has been paid to segments of the everyday discourses when respondents drew on the normative and doctrinal to emphasize, legitimize, and make sense of the everyday (or vice versa). This duality is perhaps particularly relevant in present-day Parsi Zoroastrianism because religious specialists, priests in particular, have gradually lost authority in matters such as doctrine and teachings—to the extent that non-priestly specialists, "especially those with an academic qualification in Iranian studies, may indeed command far higher authority" (Lüddeckens and Karanjia 2011, 76).

In the study of Indian Zoroastrianism, a study similar to mine is that of Iranologist Philip G. Kreyenbroek, assisted by his Parsi collaborator Shehnaz Neville Munshi. The title *Living Zoroastrianism* (2001) implies a focus on religions as practiced, aiming to elucidate "the contemporary realities of Parsi religious life" (vii). The book includes larger excerpts from interviews conducted in 1994 with thirty Parsis, mainly middle-aged (and middle-class) respondents, hitherto constituting the main source of data on the devotional life of Zoroastrians in India. However, the study is limited in that it includes only one practicing priest and therefore privileges a non-priest perspective.

While sharing an interest in religion as practiced in the everyday, the present study is distinct in that it applies a theoretical framework, using worship of the temple fires as an entry point into the examination of everyday religion amongst contemporary Parsi Zoroastrians in India. As religious practices are difficult to separate from other practices of people's everyday lives (Orsi 2003), a broad approach was taken to cover many aspects of individuals' lives: their routines, hobbies, work experiences, worries, emotional lives, conversations, and other relationships—all elements that make up respondents' day-to-day lives.

As a theoretical lens, everyday religion is often associated with the laity—to some extent in contrast to religious experts and orthodoxy. However, my study will also show how priests are part of everyday religion too; in other words, I do not take for granted that the religious lives of specialists such as priests cannot also be described as an "ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy—even contradictory—amalgam of beliefs and practices," typically ascribed to ordinary people outside of religious institutions (McGuire 2008, 4).

To what extent is fire a relevant part of everyday religion as practiced among present-day Zoroastrians in India? In the next paragraphs, I explain why people's perceptions of temple fires were chosen as an entry point exploring contemporary Zoroastrianism.

1.3.4. Approaching the consecrated temple fires

Among the Parsi Zoroastrians in India, fire occupies a prominent place in the symbolic system (Lüddeckens and Karanjia 2011), as well as in contemporary religious practice. All priestly rituals are held in the presence of fire, while in the domestic sphere, fire is—in some form or the other—"a focus at every Zoroastrian act of prayer" (Rose 2011, 30). James W. Boyd and Firoze M. Kotwal, a Western scholar and a Parsi priest-scholar respectively, list "theological reasons" for why fire has been the "principal focus of the devotional life of Zoroastrians" from its beginning to the present day (1983, 293). Fire epitomizes, they assert, "the principle of cosmic order," being elemental "to the whole created universe," in addition to serving as the "animating force of all life" and the "actual presence of the cosmic life-animating principle of 'righteousness' (*asa*)" (293).

While some scholars of Zoroastrianism have suggested that fire plays a central role in the religious lives of many Zoroastrians (e.g., Boyce 1975; Vitalone 2004; Stewart 2007), the subject has so far not been systematically investigated in Western scholarship. As early as 1975, Mary Boyce complained that notwithstanding being at "the heart of Zoroastrian devotional life," the worship of fires had not been studied systematically (Boyce 1975, 454; see also

Boyce 1968, 58).[42] The present study represents the first attempt to do so and approaches the issue by exploring people's subjective perceptions of the consecrated temple fires, investigating possible social functions related to fires.

A historical reason for the absence of such a study may be that both "insiders" and "outsiders" have been wary of the subject due to the long and somewhat thorny history of the term "fire-worshippers," often attributed to the Zoroastrians. The term itself is traced back to Herodotus (Rose 2011) and has more often than not been used in a pejorative way.

Traveling Arabs were the first to write about the Parsis in India (Wadia 2007). Many of the subsequent European travelers who wrote reports on Zoroastrianism in India focused on this particular aspect of the faith and were indeed "obsessed" with it, according to Nora Firby (1988, 179). One example is the Dutch tradesman Geleynssen de Jongh (1594–1674), who made a point of the close relationship between Ahura Mazda and the fire: "And they say that fire is most like God, and that there is hardly any distinction between them" (1988, 128). In India, and Mumbai in particular, John Wilson (1804–1875) was the Christian missionary who had the greatest impact on the Indian Zoroastrians' own perception of their religion. In his book *The Parsi Religion* (1843), Wilson rebukes the "polytheistic" religion of the Zoroastrians and the worship of temple fires in particular. He, too, was preoccupied with the link between the temple fires and Ahura Mazda, claiming that fire is "reckoned among the Persians to be the God" (1843, 193). According to Skjærvø (2011), Wilson's attack, which became well-known in the community, was based on a comparison with Christianity and triggered a reaction "which was to preoccupy scholars of Zoroastrianism into the 21st century" (322; see also Palsetia 2006). As a direct consequence of such reactions, Luhrmann (1996) argues, subsequent publications addressing Parsi Zoroastrianism "stressed that it was primarily a rational ethical system under the benevolent guidance of God rather than a religion which … was abundantly endowed with supernatural entities" (108).

Rose (2011) reasons that the stigma of idolatry or polytheism is precisely why Zoroastrians in present-day Iran in particular, emphasize that they "do not worship fire, but regard it as a symbol of Ahura Mazda" (30). The same notion is also directed at Indian Zoroastrians; most of my respondents, however, did not hesitate to label themselves as "fire-worshippers" (or worshippers of fire), but added that this was only one part of a bigger and more complex picture. Notwithstanding, the historical awareness created by the spectacle that Sheffield (2015, 548) labels the "missionary crisis" still

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42 Contrast, however, Boyce's (1975) statement: "The temple cult of fire, once instituted, became much beloved by the Zoroastrians, but it has remained outside their basic observances, and their religious lives can well be carried on without it" (455).

characterizes specialist discourse on the topic of temple fires and their role, function, and status.

Nowadays, Zoroastrian temples in India are often referred to as *agiaries* (PGuj.) or fire temples. These temples constitute social and religious centers for most Parsis[43] and are typically built to house holy fires,[44] constituting the focal point of attention for many visitors. The first fire temple in Mumbai, the Banaji Limji Agiary, was built in 1709 (Giara 2002). Prior to the existence of temples housing such fires, the domestic sphere was the main arena for religious worship. The construction of ever more temples coincided with the urban densification of Mumbai, and this led to increasingly smaller apartments that consequentially made such continuously burning home fires more or less impossible to maintain, also because of the conflagration hazards associated with the practice. In effect, the worship of fires moved from the domestic to the temple sphere during the 1800s.

As Stewart (2007) writes—and some of my elderly respondents also attested to, "some people remember their parents keeping a hearth fire, especially for ritual purposes, usually in the kitchen next to the regular fire used for cooking" (63). Still, Stewart (2007, 63–72) asserts, many of today's devotional acts are "linked to the cult of the hearth fire," where one example, stated to be important in the devotional lives of women, is singing (or reciting) the *Atash Nu Git*, a Parsi Gujarati song composed to commemorate the foundation of an Atash Behram in India in 1765 (Rose 2015a, 279).[45] The song represents, according to Stewart, the domestication of the sacred temple fire, where the singer, often a woman, personifies the priest performing the *boy-dadan* (Pahl.) ritual in their "devotional ritual for tending the hearth fire" (2007, 67).

The ritual process of constructing consecrated fires—along with the material context in which they are placed—and the daily rituals performed to make these fires burn suggest that the fires are perceived and treated as special non-human entities.

According to the Parsis, there are three grades of temple fires.[46] Those are: *Atash Dadgah* ("Fire in a proper place"), *Atash Adaran* ("Fire of fires"), and

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43 In addition to individual lay worship, performance of rituals and recitation of prayers by priests remain the main activities in the ongoing life in a temple. Many of the larger temples in Mumbai are also used for religious functions such as sermon-like speeches and lectures with a religious content, today often coupled with an academic perspective. The first temple in India was built in 1672 in Sanjan (see Giara 2002), and today around 150 temples are scattered in the country, the majority of which are found in and around Mumbai.

44 The establishment of a sacred fire is often made possible only through individual donations or voluntary contributions from the community in general—often donated "in memory of a deceased relative" (Choksy 2006, 342)—and the fire itself is named after the person(s) who provided the (main) donation.

45 It is worth noting that none of my respondents reported that they had sung or recited the *Atash Nu Git*, and only a few knew that such a song existed.

46 This is a three-fold categorization standardized by priests during Sasanian times (Choksy 2015, 398).

Figure 3: A fireplace for the home/hearth fire.

Atash Behram ("Behram fire"). The latter is often referred to as a "victorious fire," referring to the divine being connected to victory (i.e., Behram).[47]

The ritual construction of fire of the second (i.e., *adaran*) and first (i.e., *behram*) grades comprises five stages: Collection, purification, consecration, merging, and placing (or so-called enthronement).[48] A *behram* fire is created by collecting fires from sixteen different sources, in a process which normally takes over a year to complete and involves many priests.[49] During collection, the ritual procedures are started through the ignition of the first exemplar.[50] The underlying religious rationale behind the next stage, i.e., purification, is

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47 The *Qesse-ye Sanjan* ("Story of Sanjan") is for many Parsis a historical narrative (see Williams 2007 for a critical discussion) of the early years of the Zoroastrian settlers. Authored in the 15th century, the *Qesse-ye Sanjan* dramatizes, amongst other things, the journey that the Zoroastrian settlers made by boat from an island near Iran to the Indian coast. Leaving the island, the group of Zoroastrians was hit by a storm, upon which they pledged to the victorious Bahram Yazad that they would establish a fire temple in his name if he saw them through.

48 The lower grade, a *dadgah*, is ignited whilst reciting a prayer but is not consecrated to the extent that it cannot be left to die out. Some of the larger temples have a continuously burning *dadgah* fire that non-priests can tend to.

49 These sources of fire are, with variations, a burning corpse, a dyer, a king or other ruling authority, a potter, a brick-maker, a fakir or ascetic, a goldsmith, a mint, an ironsmith, an armorer, a baker, a brewer or distiller or idol-worshipper, a soldier or traveler, a shepherd, and atmospheric lighting and household fire from any Zoroastrian (Modi 1922, 201).

50 The participation in making a fire is not restricted to the priests who consecrate it. One of four sources of fire used to make an *adaran* fire is collected from a soldier's house. In an informal conversation, an elderly woman told me proudly how a portion of her family fire was taken and used when the Rustom Framna Agiary was established in Dadar on April 14th, 1928.

that fire is thought to have an originally pure essence, which is subsequently made impure through human activities. The next, and most time-consuming, stage in the ritual cycle is referred to as the actual consecration. Through the consecration process, Boyd and Kotwal (1983, 299) claim, "the fire's burden is eased."[51] The sixteen now purified and consecrated fires are subsequently placed in sixteen different censers, and a larger one is prepared for the merging process. Two priests transfer the consecrated fire originating from a corpse pyre to the larger censer. Subsequently, the other fifteen fires are taken out and united with the first, in the same "consecutive order of their consecration" (Modi 1922, 213). After that, the censer, now containing the unified fire, is carried to the temple for the final consecration. For three days, priests perform a range of rituals and recite a number of prayers. A ceremony referred to as the "enthronement" completes the larger ritual cycle, substantiating the fire's transition to a new status: from a sample of fires mainly utilized in human professions and activities to one consecrated (thus holy) fire available for religious purposes such as worship.

After the so-called enthronement, the temple fires must be kept continuously burning in the temple; the potential death of a consecrated fire is considered a ritualistic catastrophe (Stausberg 2008b, 84). The now consecrated fire is placed in a vase in a chamber physically, conceptually, and ritually separated from the surroundings, where permanently constructed ritual furrows (PGuj. *pavi*s) underline the ritual part of this appropriation. Direct access to the fire is restricted to priests who have performed the necessary purification procedures, hence maintaining their state of purity. Once placed in the fire chamber, the fire cannot be taken away from its original base, the only exception being when the temple is renovated.[52]

The process of consecration and the subsequent continuously burning fire alter the way in which such fires are treated and perceived. The consecration of a new *behram* fire, Boyd and Kotwal (1983) propose, is "the creation of a new living being, a unique spiritual-material reality" (299). Similarly, Stausberg (2008b) contends that once they are consecrated, temple fires are treated as kinds of religious "persons."

From the process of consecration, we now turn our attention to the daily ritual maintenance of temple fires. In the Zoroastrian tradition, a day is divided into five *gah*s (Pahl., Pers.), understood as periods or watches. The

51 Sarosh, whom we will meet in the following chapter, promotes a similar idea. From his perspective, the entire consecration process is essentially intended to arouse a set of dormant fire "energies" trapped in physical fires, making the ritual construction of the temple fire not the creation of something new but rather the release of something already existing.

52 Some temple fires are particularly popular in terms of attendance (Stausberg 2004b), where temples housing *behram* fires are considered more powerful and holier than fires of lesser grades, especially the Iranshah fire in Udvada. Temples housing *behram* fires are typically crowded on auspicious days, "as well as being the focus of individual worship throughout the year" (Rose 2011, 131).

officiating priest performs the *boy-dadan* (Pahl., "offering incense") at the turn of each period, a ritual referred to as the "feeding" of the fires.[53] Non-priests offer sandalwood and praise to the fires, seen as material and spiritual nourishment respectively, and the fires are expected to provide blessings in response to worshippers' offerings. Hence, the relationship between the fire and its worshippers amounts to a reciprocal one in that they are cultural entities in need of care, attention, and sustenance in order to survive (Stausberg 2010b, 285). This is the main role of the *boiwalla* (PGuj., "[the one] doing the *boi*"),[54] or fire priest, who "tends" the fire.

Praising the fires is accomplished by recitations of the *Atash Niyaesh* (Pers., "Praise of Fire"), a prayer which is recited by priests during the *boi* ritual and non-priests during the day, both in the temple and at home. A key topic in the *Atash Niyaesh* is the exchange interaction between worshippers and the fire—and ultimately Ahura Mazda (see chapter 3.3.4). Both the *Atash Niyaesh* prayer and the aforementioned *Atash Nu Git* texts personify the ritual fire by ascribing it with human-like features (e.g., awareness) and superhuman powers "in terms of granting the boons" (Stewart 2007, 68).

Once consecrated, such fires are, from a theological perspective (in India at least), believed to fulfil their role as intermediaries, being the main link between the human and the divine world (Lüddeckens and Karanjia 2011, 48; Choksy 2006, 342).[55] In particular, fire is closely connected to Ahura Mazda, both as a representation of and the closest link to the supreme god, but in particular as the son of Ahura Mazda (Choksy and Kotwal 2005, 227). In ritual practice, one connection between the two, Lüddeckens and Karanjia (2011) note, is how the invisible Ahura Mazda is believed to become visible "only indirectly, through meditation before the sacred fire" (42). Consequentially, the temple fire is referred to as a *qibla* (Arab.) or "directional point" (Choksy and Kotwal 2005, 218).[56]

A consecrated fire is not the only temple attraction for Parsis. Water is another important element in the Zoroastrian symbolic system, and a well is connected to all temples in India. From a priestly perspective, the well water is primarily for ritual use. Devotees, however, approach the well to worship, make offerings, and ask for boons of Ava Ardavisur Banu, the daughter of

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53 From this point on, I will refer to the *boy-dadan* as the "*boi* ritual" or just "*boi*." I use McCauley and Lawson's (2002) definition to contrast religious ceremonies (e.g., *jashan)* from rituals (e.g., *boi*), where the latter, in contrast to the former, is meant to bring "about changes in the religious world" (14).

54 I vary between referring to *boiwalla*s and fire priests throughout the book, both for variance and the fact that my respondents use these terms interchangeably.

55 In the Iranian situation, the "modernizing elite has attempted to downplay the importance accorded to fire" (Stausberg and Karanjia 2015, 371; see also Stausberg 2010b), where "an attenuation in notions of purity and pollution with regard to fire has taken place" (Choksy 2006, 337). The more prominently located fires and fire temples "have partly been made accessible to people belonging to other religions" (Stausberg 2015, 183).

56 Both priest and non-priest respondents use *qibla* to denote either the fire or the fire vase.

Ahura Mazda said to preside over the waters.[57] Some of my respondents reported a special attachment to one specific well. The most popular one, said to fulfill wishes and provide miraculous cures, is the Bhikha Behram Well, founded in 1725 (Choksy and Kotwal 2005; Choksy 2015, 402).

Returning now to the theoretical discussion initiated above, upon approaching the temple fires as possible targets of both *basic* and *personal* relationships (as defined), some ethnographers indicate that the fires are perceived as social entities. When accounting for how fire became an object of personal devotion for Zoroastrian lay people, Mary Boyce (1989) speculates:

There can be no doubt that in the course of time fire would have grown to be more than merely an object for all but the most intellectual of his followers … With its movement and changes of state [the fire] seems to be alive and can readily be apprehended as sentient and aware for the services of its worshippers, whose attention it constantly demands (69).

Boyce here suggests that it is the appearance and characteristics of continuously burning fires that explain why ritual fires are transformed from objects to what seems like subjects of worship.

While (seemingly) no specific questions addressed the role of fire in respondents' everyday lives, some of the respondents quoted in the aforementioned *Living Zoroastrianism* (Kreyenbroek 2001) talk about "un-happy" fires which can "communicate" with the worshipper—fires considered to be "living and conscious" (143–167). Some interviewees stated that some fires get "less love and attention" than others (119), that some were "attached" to a certain fire (119), and that one had established a "relationship" with one specific fire "at an early age" (127).

On a related note, Lüddeckens and Karanjia (2011) write that many Parsis attribute "distinct personalities" to and develop "a special relationship with a fire, or … several different fires" (47). What such "special relationships" might imply is not elaborated further in their discussion. Targeting priests exclusively in Mumbai, Michael Stausberg (2010b) explores what he calls the "cognitive and emotional relations" (286) between priests and temple fires and notes that several respondents "mention that they do communicate with the fire, either in visible form, or in the form of the exchange of messages, generally in a verbal way" (289).

Taken together, different sources provide indications that the temple fires are ascribed with life and agency and are experienced as communicative and interactive entities to which worshippers can get attached on a personal level. This does not in itself predict relationships as operationalized above but does

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57 Grether (2016) notes that in many Asian fire rituals, "Fire and water represent contrasting functions in the ritual arena. Water is plural, feminine, and multilocal. Fire, in contrast, is singular [and] masculine" (48).

strongly suggest that such entities *can* be plausible targets for such relationships. The question is: Are they?

The present study is the first to systematically investigate the role and relevance of the temple fires in everyday lives of contemporary Zoroastrians. The study's main focus is when, how, and why humans—in our case Parsi Zoroastrians—extend aspects of social relationships beyond the human to the non-human sphere.

1.3.5. Brief conclusion

The combination of a relational with an everyday approach to religion narrows down the focus. Locating these relationships in the realm of the "everyday" allows for a deep and contextually sensitive exploration taking place in the context of people's lives. More than twenty years have passed since interview data was collected for the *Living Zoroastrianism* (Kreyenbroek 2001) project. In addition to providing an updated account of contemporary Parsi Zoroastrianism as practiced in Mumbai, the present study also contributes to the field by shedding light on why fire in general and the consecrated temple fires in particular seem to be important in the devotional life of many Parsi Zoroastrians. My main argument, which will be developed and discussed throughout the forthcoming chapters, is that the temple fires gain this importance because they, through processes of ritualization, socialization, personal reflection, and exegesis of texts, are seen to invite worshippers into meaningful and in some cases long-term personal relationships.

Beyond the study of Zoroastrianism, this book provides an in-depth qualitative study of one part of human sociality, namely relations to non-human entities seeking to explore how far the attribution of sociality to the non-human world extends and how rich, complex, and emotionally satisfying such relationships can be.

The set of theoretical questions developed above are complemented with a set of research questions emerging from the discussion of the empirical case: 1) What is the role of fire in general and the temple fires in particular in present-day Parsi Zoroastrianism as practiced by my respondents? 2) What kind of features and traits characterize respondents' perceptions of the fires? 3) What are the different ways of talking about the fires in everyday conversation? 4) Are there relevant differences in how priests and non-priests, men and women, and different age groups relate to fires?

In the final section of this chapter, I demonstrate how the research questions were approached methodologically in the empirical field setting. It contains a presentation and evaluation of methodological and relevant research ethical issues ranging from the main methods of data collection to the presentation of data in terms of in-depth portraits of four individual respondents following this chapter.

1.4. Field trips and beyond

In 2012 and 2013 respectively, I went on two field trips to Mumbai to live among the Parsis. During both visits, I had the privilege to stay as a paying guest with a Parsi host in a house located in the Dadar Parsi colony—the largest Parsi residential complex in India. The stay provided invaluable regular and enjoyable social company and support during what was, at times, a lonely fieldwork experience. It also provided a window to the daily routines of one Parsi: from the tying of the *kusti* early in the morning before work to the evening stroll in the park or the nearby fire temple for the daily "chit-chat."

1.4.1. Interview methodology

The motivation going forward with this study was exploratory in the sense of wanting to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, motivations, narratives, and feelings of real people in the context of their everyday lives. With its novel theoretical focus on relationships and the temple fires, I was working, as I have shown, in more or less uncharted territory. Qualitative approaches collect complex, rich, and refined material. Since relationships are (also), from a certain point of view, kinds of narratives, and approaching the everyday involves tapping into subjective experiences, thoughts, perspectives, and feelings, a qualitative approach to data collection was called for from the outset.

So-called narrative interviews bring forth individual life stories, where the role of the interviewer is mainly to create the right atmosphere to allow the respondent to express herself or himself (Bremborg 2011, 312). While utilizing such interviews is, from one perspective, in line with the everyday approach to religion, this particular study combines an empirical focus with a theory-driven agenda in the form of a relational approach. A more structured way of constructing interviews was needed to be able to also cover the research questions emerging from the discussions.

Semi-structured interviews comprise the main methodological technique chosen to uncover such conceptions. Such interviews allow for crucial flexibility. Semi-structured interviews enabled me to tackle and include new elements and questions continuously as they arose during my field trips.

Upon arrival in Mumbai, I developed an interview guide which was modified and updated, especially during the initial stages of the first field trip. The interview guide consisted of a combination of key themes and second-order questions. Based on this guide, the interviews were broken down into four broader semi-thematic parts with corresponding groups of questions to be presented chronologically during the interview. Naturally, and often enough, respondents tapped into a specific theme before it was originally

meant to be brought up, and sometimes themes or topics which were not a part of the guide from the start. To avoid disrupting the flow of the interview, the interview guide was not followed blindly, but I did try, and usually managed, to cover all themes and questions.

The first part of the guide concerned questions relating to the day-to-day life of the respondent, not exclusively in relation to religion (although it soon enough became a topic of discussion). This part was ignited through opening suggestions like, "Describe an ordinary day in your life," with a follow-up question like: "What is your social and religious background?" The responses to these initial probes naturally lead to information about, for example, the respondent's interhuman relations, education, profession, and so forth.

For the second group of questions, I used the fire temple as the focal point. Questions included inquiries about frequency of attendance, habits, routines, conceptions about rituals, or other related practices. If not already touched upon, the initial probe was: "Do you go the fire temple?" When making an interview guide, the way one asks (and which) questions matters in the literature. The question was asked in a way that would not presuppose that the respondent did actually go to the fire temple. Moreover, it was phrased this way as an invitation to talk about it.

The third, and related, group of questions was meant to cover all things related to the temple fires, like ideas, experiences, and feelings. If the respondent herself or himself did not already bring them up (which they often did), the choice to delay such questions was made so as not to impose on the respondent an unwanted focus on the fires. One question was construed to initiate this third part: "Do you have one or more fires or temples that you frequent more often?"[58] In line with this precautionary line, measures were taken not to import analytical categories, in particular "relating" and "relationship" until late in the interviews.

The fourth cluster comprised a less focused and full battery of questions including a wide variety of topics, such as the respondents' personal perspective on other religions' practices and beliefs,[59] their view on the "fire-worshipper" term, and their opinions on intermarriage and other hotly contested issues within the Parsi community.

Participant observation refers to the participation in the "daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people" (Musante 2015, 251), and while semi-structured interviews comprised the main method of data collection, participant observation was drawn on in cases when such an approach was feasible. My active presence in community events such as

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58 Other questions included, "Do you feel that you can communicate with the fires?" or simply, "Do the fire cares if you have done something wrong to other people?" The latter question was posed probing for a connection between fires and morality.

59 For example: "Do you visit temples or attend festivals devoted to divine beings of other religions?"

festivals and anniversaries, or in more informal (and often private) events such as birthdays and dinner parties, allowed me to have a close-up view of the day-to-day life of parts of the community. The degree of participation typically varied according to the hosts' expectations and my own conscious decision, and varied from very active (e.g., festivals, anniversaries, dinner parties) to less active (e.g., religious school classes). I moreover tried to involve myself in people's lives by walking, talking, driving, and dining with as many as possible. On one occasion during the second fieldwork, I went on a day trip to Udvada with two respondents. However, my status as a non-Parsi restricted my direct participation in parts of the group's ritual life as well as my admission to the interior of a temple. One such instance was when my host and his family came home from a temple celebration and very kindly explained to me that I could not partake in the eating of *prasad* (i.e., consecrated food) due to the "rules of the religion."[60] Matters of purity are central to Zoroastrianism (Williams 2015). In the case above, the purity measures preventing non-Parsis from touching consecrated items or people (e.g., priests) still very much apply.

1.4.2. From informants to respondents

I employed a longitudinal approach in that I accumulated data from the same sample over time (Roof 2011, 80), both because I wanted to investigate whether (religious) change at the level of the individual took place and—especially—because of the awareness that the "depth, significance, and honesty of respondent responses tend to grow over the course of a series of interviews" (Levy and Hollan 2015, 331). A core group of respondents was interviewed several times, some over the course of both field trips.

My approach to all interviews was inspired by person-centered ethnography (see Levy 1990; Levy and Hollan 1988; 2015). Person-centered interviewing and observation shifts focus from the individual-as-an-informant to the individual-as-a-respondent (Levy and Hollan 2015). The role of an informant is usually to give her or his perspective as an "expert witness (albeit with a limited and special perspective) about some community belief or practice" (2015, 316). A respondent, on the other hand, is recruited to respond to a set of questions focusing on her or his *personal* opinions, stories, and experiences in relation to her or his community—an approach linking well with the focus on the everyday lives of individuals.

In tune with what could be called the person-centered everyday approach to religion, I carried out all interviews—including those with religious specialists such as priests—emphasizing this personal dimension by encouraging people

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60　The use of terms like *prasad* is but one of many examples from the source material (i.e., the collected data) demonstrating how a number of Parsis are affected by Hindu religious culture (Hinnells 2015a).

to speak freely about their personal feelings, experiences and stories, and subjective opinions and thoughts on different matters. Many respondents responded very positively to this call, and the interviews often resulted in deeply personal and intimate conversations about both love and loss. The fact that I met some of the respondents several times, often over the course of two field trips, helped to create shared reference points, in addition to a friendly and informal atmosphere during the interviews, which made many respondents speak freely and unconcernedly.

It is my clear impression that my physical appearance (e.g., young age, modest appearance) and specific research interests (concentrating on the individual and not on expert knowledge) further contributed positively to this friendly and informal atmosphere. Some respondents—for example Feroza, presented in chapter 2—reported afterwards that speaking about certain matters with an outsider helped her open up more freely than usual, sharing stories she had never shared with anyone before.[61]

Finally, and fortunately, bilingualism is the norm among the Parsis as most speak both Gujarati and English, the latter having increasingly gained importance at the expense of the former (Hinnells 2005, 52). Many of my respondents (e.g., Rustom and Feroza) speak English as a first language at home as well. A hybrid language consisting of Gujarati and English elements is often spoken in public.

1.4.3. Drawing and categorizing relationships

Two supplements were added to the interview part of the methodology. All respondents in the core group (see below) undertook a few complementary tasks after their final interview. In cooperation with my PhD co-supervisor, Alan P. Fiske, I adopted (and adapted) a methodological approach sometimes used in social psychology (see e.g., Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992) as a possible supplementary addition to the oral part of the interviews, not knowing whether it would be of any use or theoretical interest. The idea was that one could find other ways of having respondents provide information about their relations besides talking: What happens if we ask the respondents to draw simple graphic models of their relationships? To that end, I asked participants in the core group to represent their relationship between themselves and someone else (the temple fire in the first field trip; mother, father, and Ahura Mazda in the second) on a sheet of paper. To avoid a large

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61 The many friendships I made (some of which I still sustain) during both field trips made me (even) more aware of the somewhat troubling situation one finds oneself in during fieldwork. Tanya M. Luhrmann (1996) describes this situation well: "To take notes upon that friendship, to go home and treat the notes as data and have the friends serve at least in one's mind as exemplars of the culture one describes … [is] unsettling" (233).

degree of variations and idiosyncrasy, and thus allow for comparison, I asked them to draw only two circles (representing themselves and X, Y, or Z) instead of a free drawing. The theoretical reasoning behind the inclusion of such a task was to get a non-verbal entry-point into the respondents' way of conceptualizing their relationships. In addition to constituting an interesting set of different-than-interview data, the task turned out to be a great facilitator for further conversation when I asked the respondents to elaborate on their drawings after finalizing them. As an addition to the interviews, the drawings provide an opportunity to compare the oral and written representations of relationships.

As a final and complementary part, with the aim of adding to the two other types of material (i.e., oral and cognitive representations), I included another element of categorization inspired by the RMt approach discussed above. Together with Alan P. Fiske, I created summarized and culturally adapted versions of the four respective relational models and asked respondents to choose one (or more) from the list.[62]

1.4.4. Recruiting respondents

The recruitment process took place in two main stages. The early stages of the first field trip were characterized by a hands-on approach. In contrast to a more focused recruitment strategy, for example by targeting specific groups, I recruited broadly, trying to cover a wide range of roles (e.g., fire priests), age cohorts, and perspectives (e.g., Khshnoom). The Ilm-e-Khshnoom movement (or Khshnoomism), is called the mystical version of Zoroastrianism and is based on the explorations and teachings of Behramshah Shroff (1857–1927). While the movement does not have membership in a strict sense, many self-identify as Khshnoomists. Jenny Rose (personal communication) notes that many Parsis are implicitly Khshnoomist in their approach to religion (for instance, by referring to the "vibrations" emanating from prayers), and its impact is more widespread than acknowledged in the literature.

Despite having had previous field experience in Mumbai among the Parsis (see Tandberg 2009), I established contact with a so-called "door-opener." I was introduced to Ramiyar Karanjia, an amiable and resourceful teacher-priest, known for his extensive collaboration with Western scholars.[63] As well

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62 At the end of their last interview, all respondents in the core group (see below) were given a piece of paper with the following descriptions: "You and the fire are one together. Essentially, you are the same: The fire is you and you are the fire (CS). The fire is your superior: You respect and revere it. You follow and obey the fire; the fire guides and protects you (AR). You and the fire keep things evenly matched, one-for-one. What you do for the fire balances what the fire does for you (EM). What you get from the fire is proportional to what you give it. What you receive from the fire depends on the value of the offerings you make to the fire (MP)."

63 I was introduced to Ramiyar through my main PhD supervisor, Michael Stausberg.

as being a general resource in terms of knowledge of the community, my association with Ramiyar made it easier to get in touch with people, and it was clear that his indirect involvement in the project functioned as a stamp of approval. I was also invited by him to attend Avestan classes as an observer, which became a recruitment arena in itself. Finally, it also enabled me to be invited to a range of community happenings which would have normally been out of my reach. One such event ignited the recruitment process. During my first field trip, I participated in a fire temple anniversary, accompanied by my then girlfriend (now wife), as an invited speaker. As well as being approached by many who were willing to talk immediately afterwards, the following daily visits to one of the parks in the area around Dadar led me to be approached by Parsis who had seen me there and, luckily for me, wanted to talk.

Typically, in the weeks following my presentation I came into contact with potential respondents through already recruited ones—the so-called snowball sampling. In some of these cases, the statement "You must meet this person" also included the disclaimer, "but he might not be that religious." While it was of no great strategic concern, I tried to avoid getting a sample devoid of religiously more moderate or even indifferent respondents.

In my second field trip, a more focused theoretical sampling strategy was adopted to fill what seemed to be gaps in the sample. One such gap was the lack of certain figures in the community, such as high priests. Firoze D. Kotwal, the former head priest of the Wadiaji Atash Behram, was one such case. Sarosh, portrayed in the forthcoming chapter, was also recruited for strategic reasons as he represented a unique case, being at the time a head priest, the main *boiwalla*, and a member of the aforementioned Khshnoom movement.

At the start of all interviews, respondents were asked to read a sheet with information about the specific goals and plans of the project, possible implications of participation, and research ethical issues related to confidentiality, anonymity, and storage of information. Informed consent was especially essential in relation to the portraits (see below) occupying a prominent place in the book, so the respondent knew what he or she was committing to when agreeing to participate in an interview. All respondents agreed to proceed with the interview at that stage. Immediately after the interviews formally ended, and if the respondent seemed comfortable with the interview situation and the conversation flowed freely, I asked her or him if they wanted to meet up a second time.

The interview location varied according to whether respondents had specific needs. Main locations included people's homes, convenient spots near their workplaces, or the Dadar Athornan Boarding Madressa, a priestly boarding school in Dadar (Mumbai). Despite being a religious primer by underscoring the religious focus of the project, the Madressa was conveniently located within walking distance from where I was staying. Moreover, it also provided an opportunity to minimize the effects of social impact by conducting the interview alone in the library or in the quiet garden outside.

My experiences in the field obviously included moments or episodes where things did not go according to plan. My digital recorder did run out of batteries on some occasions. Arrangements for interviews fell through because I underestimated the Mumbai traffic (or overestimated my language skills to get me where I wanted!), or because the potential respondent did not show up in time—or at all. One such episode, early on in my first field trip, will suffice to exemplify the point that when working in the field, one is not only dependent on oneself to avoid flat batteries, so to speak, but also on other people's schedules and wishes. I had arranged with an elderly woman to meet up early one day but was woken by a phone call from that very woman. She canceled the meeting on the grounds that, according to her horoscope, meeting with strangers could potentially be harmful for her that week.

1.4.5. "Admission for Parsees only"

Unlike Zoroastrian temples in North America and Europe (Choksy 2006, 341), outsiders are denied access to the interior of an Indian fire; a sign at the entrance of all Indian fire temples saying, "Admission to Parsees only" (or variations thereof) illustrates this point.[64] One stated reason among my respondents was that the mere presence of an outsider laying her or his eyes on the fire brings pollution upon it.

From a methodological point of view, the closed temples meant that one important part of the religious (and social) life of many Parsis was inaccessible to me. I tried to reduce the negative impact of such impediments in two ways. Firstly, I often sat chatting to the priests (and non-priest visitors) on the temple veranda, which provided an insight into the everyday life and functioning of the temples, in particular how priests coped with the long working hours. Even there, many laypeople raised their eyebrows, silently trying to elicit a nod from the priest signaling that my presence was acceptable. Secondly, I developed a second-hand observation design. The goal was twofold: 1) to tease out how idealized (and normative) descriptions of fire temple behavior relate to on-the-ground behavior, and (2) to shed light on the degree of individual variation in temple behavior. To enable such a protocol, I recruited two Parsi research assistants by posting a letter in two popular magazines.[65] Both were female with extended knowledge of academic work and scientific methods. Midway through the observation process, one of them was excluded by mutual agreement.[66]

64 "Iranis" are sometimes added onto signs.
65 These were *Parsiana* and *Jam-e-Jamshed*, in addition to an online ad on the web page Zoroastrians.net.
66 Her social position in her neighborhood temples attracted unwanted attention, and her other job obligations denied her the opportunity to travel to other temples further away. We continued to meet on a more informal basis (and we still keep in touch).

Figure 4: From the Iranshah temple in Udvada.

An observation protocol was developed after several test-rounds incorporating issues both practical and theoretical in nature (e.g., time-pressured context, where some conduct their temple routines rather quickly). The protocol was highly structured to minimize the impact of a personal interpretation on the actual observation units, and the risk of not recording details was deemed irrelevant (or obvious) from the observer's perspective. However, open slots for such personal interpretations were included, which yielded much relevant data in themselves.[67]

My research assistant became an invaluable resource throughout the process—also post-fieldwork—helping both during data collection and subsequent transcription. Her supportiveness was invaluable to the project and its progression. Because of our extensive interactions and the methodological nature of many of our conversations, I asked if she could share with me her reflections on the same process. The quote is taken from the last section of the written response (for the sake of anonymity, information that could reveal her identity has been omitted):

During the collection of data, it was extremely interesting to observe people in the fire temple. It was observed that different approaches were taken by people towards the

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67 According to one observation, a woman with her husband and son (apparently), around thirty years of age, stayed in the temple for less than ten minutes. The assistant registered the following comment in the open slot, nicely illustrating a case of religious transmission: "She also held the child's hand to guide him to touch the marble entrance of the fire to his head and held his hand whilst lighting a lamp."

same thing, e.g., putting the *sukhar*. Some would put it to their forehead and place it into the tray; some would just put it down. Some would just bow to the fire, whereas the others would touch the doors and bow. All believe and have faith—just differently manifested. However, I did not believe that the person who is less expressive in behavior believes or has any lesser faith. We all have our individual differences … It is also beautiful to see people bond in the fire temple or families bond, e.g., young parents teaching their kids to pray. One of the biggest methodological challenges that were faced during collection of data was meeting people who were known. Indians tend to be extremely inquisitive about what one is doing. An observer has to maintain confidentiality to the best of one's ability to not allow external influences on data collection … Before I set to assist in this dissertation, I was in [X]. There were times I would want to go to the fire temple during my stay, but I was situated at a place where there was no access to a fire temple … I believe that this opportunity compensated for all the times that I genuinely wanted to spend time in an Atash Behram or Agiary.

The sentiment described in this quote illustrates that for some, participation in the research process, either as interviewees or as assistants, became a potential resource for personal growth (see chapter 3 for further discussion).

1.4.6. The final sample

Interviews with fifty-four individuals were recorded and comprise the interview material. The interviews are markedly varied in terms of duration, lasting from thirty minutes up to three hours. Most of the respondents (thirty-nine out of fifty-four) were interviewed individually, while six respondents were interviewed in pairs (one young and newly married couple, two middle-aged female friends, and two during a one-day trip to Udvada), and the rest in two focus groups (seven women and three Udvada *boiwalla*s respectively).

A total of fourteen respondents were interviewed more than once: seven laypeople and seven religious specialists/priests. Six individuals comprise the core group interviewed over the course of both field trips, five being the most times that a given respondent was interviewed (i.e., Arnaz; see chapter 2.2).

In terms of gender, the sample includes twenty-eight women and twenty-six men. While Kreyenbroek's 1994 data exclusively contained middle-aged or elderly Parsis, this sample is more varied. Middle-aged respondents comprise the largest age group (around 35%), closely followed by elderly (around 30%), youth (around 20%), and young adults (around 15%). Consequently, the sample reflects the demographic characteristics of the present Parsi community with a predominantly middle-aged and especially elderly population.

As noted above, in contrast to Kreyenbroek's 1994 data, where only one priest was interviewed, this sample includes twelve priests—at the time both practicing and non-practicing freelance priests. As previously stated, not all

Parsis self-identify as religious, and while it is difficult to measure such traits, six individuals out of the total fifty-four expressed a less engaged outlook in terms of commitment to religious beliefs and practices. This typically implied that they rarely visited the fire temple or prayed at home.

The observation sample includes data from fifty-three randomized observations during four of five *gah*s, with the exception of the *Ushahin*, or midnight *gah.* Most observations were made in two temples housing *adaran* fires, except eight observations from one *Atash Behram* temple. Prior to the observations, the head priest granted me permission and a notice was put in front of the gate to the fire temple in question. The majority (thirty-five) of the observed were women, indicating that more women than men visit the fire temple (see discussion in chapter 3).

Concerning age cohorts for the observational data, the sample was more or less divided into four equal parts corresponding to the cohorts above. Generally, the data reveal a great degree of individual variation in all aspects of temple behavior, and visits range from five minutes to over one and a half hours.

Having provided an overview of a rich and dynamic set of data and its genesis, I now turn to the process of data handling and analysis in terms of transcription and coding.

1.4.7. Data analysis: From sound, to text, to deep coding

If "analysis" in general is defined as a thorough investigation of complex phenomena in order to understand their nature or to discover their essential features, qualitative data analysis is "continuous in that it interweaves with other aspects of the research process" (Bryman and Burgess 1994, 218). More specifically, qualitative data analysis is, Ritchie and Spencer (1994) assert, essentially about detection with fundamental tasks such as "defining, categorizing, theorizing, explaining, exploring and mapping" (176). The transcription process, and in particular the subsequent deep coding comprises the main analytical strategy in this study.

Transcription is an interpretive process where issues range from when a sentence starts and ends to what kind of non-verbal information to include, such as emphases (Kvale 2007, 92–93). Observations made during the interviews and the field trips at large were tested against the detail-oriented repeated listening to the interviews.

I chose to transcribe the entire set of interviews verbatim to do justice to the detailed level of information, not knowing what parts could eventually be relevant or not.[68] Moreover, to capture the level of emotion and to allow the

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68 Only shorter bits of the interviews were not transcribed in such a manner, and instead a short summary was written in footnotes to make it easy to locate at a later stage of the process.

reader to get insights into the thinking process of the speaker, I also included non-verbal communication such as laughter, crying, breaks, and grunts in the quotes. To capture each speaker's individuality, I have decided to preserve the respondents' replies as much as possible, avoiding improving their formulations or correcting apparent mistakes.

Verbatim transcriptions of more than sixty hours of interview material turned out to be very time-consuming. One positive side effect, however, was that they contributed to a high level of acquaintance with the material as a whole, not only specific individuals and their interviews.

Data reduction is the process where material is broken down and sorted. Verbatim transcriptions were partly utilized to make the large amount of data more workable in the subsequent coding process. Generally speaking, coding is the process of categorizing data to facilitate the analysis. More specifically, coding refers to a methodological procedure where one identifies and names limited data units which in the next step usually serve a theoretical purpose by developing new categories and subcategories (Bremborg 2011, 317). At the start of the coding process, my main target was to organize and categorize a comprehensive set of data to make it easily accessible (e.g., searching for certain concepts) as the first step toward theorizing (e.g., searching for relations between concepts).

All interviews were coded and then re-coded at a second stage on the basis of the updated and expanding codebook using *HyperRESEARCH*, a software designed to assist projects involving qualitative data analysis. The software was intuitive and easy to use and did not require prior experience. It enhanced the process by making the categorization and subsequent search more efficient.

More specifically, shorter keywords were applied to a segment of text with the goal of identifying them in order to compare, contrast, and/or count how prominent such themes or relations are (Tanggaard and Brinkmann 2015, 47). Typically, a code was attached to a text sequence of one to five sentences, and the codes were often two words (e.g., "PRAYER effective").

In the process of coding, I combined data-driven codes with theory-driven coding, where individual codes were respectively either inducted from the material (e.g., "FIRE god") or deducted using categories from a pre-determined theoretical framework as the basis (e.g., "FIRE agency"). In some cases, such as the example below, these two levels corresponded:
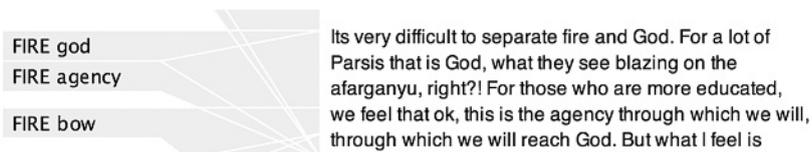
Figure 5: Coding in HyperRESEARCH.

Many of the theory-driven codes were broader (e.g., "FIRE communica-tion"), while the data-driven codes were more specific (e.g., "FIRE listens"). Because the temple fires were an important focus, the codes related to fire were in many cases very specific; as such, they comprise the majority of the codes.[69]

The outcome of the coding procedures was a total of 2,521 codes. The coding allowed me to look for frequencies, for example how many of my respondents mentioned concept x and z and in which context. Another aspect was that it allowed me to see how prevalent certain ideas were in comparison with others (see chapter 3). The outcome of the analysis process was the creation of a novel framework. Its novelty lies in the fact that it consists of several approaches not hitherto used—or at least combined—in this way.

Due to the decision to present four individuals and their life stories in longer ethnographic portraits, a small set of the interviews was coded and analyzed in more detail.

1.4.8. In-depth portraits of individuals

Ethnography is sometimes described as a "portrait of a people," a written description of the customs, beliefs, and practices of a particular culture (Harris and Johnson 2000). The next chapter contains four in-depth portraits, providing a window into the lives of four Parsi individuals, two men and two women. These portraits bring us closer to individual life stories and biographies, to the relation between individuals' religious practice and changes in them, and to shared human experiences of death, family, friends, and professional lives. Also, the portraits serve as examples of the level of trust offered to me by my respondents and the openness of their responses. The initial idea of writing such portraits was partly due to recognition of the wealth and depth of their responses.

Genre-wise, the classical example in anthropology is Marjorie Shostak's (2000) book about "Nisa," one individual respondent. In the study of religion, a comparable genre attempt is found in Meredith B. McGuire's *Lived Religion* (2008). McGuire describes a group of informants through shorter vignettes, typically one page long. These vignettes act as illustrative examples of a broader theoretical point aiming at interpreting the "complex religious lives of modern individuals" (McGuire 2008, 6). Reinhold Loeffler presents in his book *Islam in Practice* (1988) portraits of twenty-one men in a Shiite Iranian village. Loeffler documents their individual world views, each representing a distinct outlook or social type such as "the Mullah," "the Mystic," and so forth.

A more relevant comparison is the aforementioned *Living Zoroastrianism* (Kreyenbroek 2001). There, all thirty interviewees are presented, but instead

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69   A set of "reflexive codes" was also included, with a special focus on the impact of the interviewer (see chapter 3 for discussion).

of summarized vignettes, these portraits contain excerpts from the interviews, where only a few paragraphs (typically about the personal background of the informant) and summarizing snippets are included. Similar to McGuire and Loeffler's approach, the individual informants function as examples of certain positions: the "orthodox," "the traditionalist," and so on.

Albeit sharing the same focus on subjective thoughts, experiences, and feelings, the portraits presented in this book are much more comprehensive, as will become apparent in chapter 2, offering a more detailed and in-depth account. Most importantly, they do not primarily function as attempts at typological dissection but rather as examples in and of themselves. Together they arguably illustrate the fruitfulness of a relational approach to the case at hand, and possibly also similar cases.

One challenge in writing such portraits is the issue of de-contextualization. Answers are necessarily taken out of their immediate context and sewed back together into a somewhat different, and perhaps more coherent, whole. I have taken measures to limit the degree of de-contextualization by providing the immediate context for an answer when deemed relevant (i.e., the question asked or the topics discussed) and other relevant information.

In issues pertaining to research ethics, the sensitive nature and detail of personal information in such portraits demanded extra care with regard to anonymity, also because of the size of the community and the degree of gossip expected, as a majority still live in so-called colonies (or *baug*s) or, more specifically, residential housing complexes.

One way I tried to tackle the ethical issues connected to such portraits was to send a final draft of these to all four respondents, asking them to respond to questions pertaining to relevant research ethical considerations. A page-long text was sent to the four individuals about issues relating to the presentation and dissemination of the study and thereby the portrait in question, after finalization. All four individuals responded positively. Relevant for this discussion, the first question asked whether the respondent her- or himself felt that the draft contained information which needed to be rephrased or deleted due to potentially unwanted attention to one's personality or life story. I have incorporated many of their responses in the individual portraits.

To all respondents—not just the four portrayed—fictitious names (selected randomly) were given to safeguard their anonymity. Some of the priests and religious experts, however, are presented with their permission by their real names as it turned out to be difficult to conceal their identities since their opinions and views on most matters are already publicly known. I asked one of them, Khojeste Mistree, whether it would be a problem for him if his name were mentioned in the study. He replied:

As long as I'm quoted correctly, I think … But the answer is, "yes, my name can be used." In terms of what I've said, I stand by what I have said; I haven't said anything which I don't stand by. But I hope you use it discretely and fairly. You know, because

sometimes I've found that, you know, I've helped people, and they haven't acknowledged the help, or they've misquoted [me].

Khojeste later explained that the fact that the interview had been taped reassured him that he would be quoted accurately.

Last but not least, one more factor that could jeopardize the anonymity promised to all respondents was the fact that the research assistant transcribed a smaller part of the interviews (which I then subsequently went through myself). I tried to minimize the effect by ensuring that she only transcribed interviews with so-called religious experts who were going to be presented by their real names, or with people whom she could not identify when she started listening or throughout the process.

I was fortunate to be able to stay in Mumbai amongst the Parsis during two field trips. The process of transcription, and particularly the writing of the portraits, felt like re-visiting the field and functioned positively as such.

1.5. Conclusion and way forward

In this chapter, I outline my theoretical agenda, present the empirical case, and discuss issues of methodology and research ethics related to the study. Human beings form emotional bonds with a wide variety of entities. To resume my theoretical point of departure, the human need to relate extends into the sphere of non-human entities. That humans bond strongly with other animals, especially pets like cats and dogs, is well attested in the literature. Studies show that pets can provide a kind of unconditional support on a stable basis. The provision of social support is one of the key reasons why human relations with pets become so encompassing and enduring. As we will see in the following chapters, an added reason is the perceived inadequacy of interhuman relationships, and the search for more complete ones is yet another element playing a role in how and why humans form long-term and meaningful relationships with non-human entities.

In section one, I argue for an extension of the model by including nonanimal and non-human entities typical of religion, from statues to gods, into social interactional analysis. A key argument going forward is that these relations are comparable to interhuman ones. Consequentially, studying such relations can be achieved by operationalizing definitions built on existing theories and studies of interhuman relations. To enable such an analysis, interaction and not ontological differences is the starting point, and the analytical vocabulary has to be receptive to the fact that the relational partner in question does not respond within known human categories, but that the outcomes of relationships, such as providing social support, is similar enough to enable a comparative analysis between interhuman and other-than-human

relations. Relationships, then, I argue, are kinds of narratives more than properties, construed by one individual on the basis of interaction, requiring no implicit or explicit social contract or agreement between two (or more) entities to exist as such. To be of use in an empirical analysis, I operationalize *basic* and *personal* relationships by means of existing theories of interhuman relationships, adapting them to accommodate the fact that the main target entity in this analysis is—from an outsider's perspective—a non-responsive one.

In the second section, I present the empirical case: Parsis' relations to temple fires housed in Zoroastrian temples in contemporary India. Fire occupies a prominent place both in the symbolic system and in the ritual practices of Zoroastrians. Importantly, it has been suggested that it plays a central role in the everyday practice and observances of many Zoroastrians—especially in India—treated as a kind of person connecting worshippers and Ahura Mazda (or God). Ethnographic evidence indicates that the temple fires are imbued with life and agency and experienced as communicative and interactive entities to which worshippers can get attached on a personal level. This does not in itself predict relationships as operationalized above but does strongly suggest that such entities *can* be plausible targets for such relationships and, as the following chapter will show, they indeed are—partly so because of the cultural context where such relational companions are "available" and supported by immediate social structures, including significant others.

In the third and final section, I explain how the two sets of research questions were approached methodologically in an empirical field setting and present the main methodology and relevant research ethical issues. Studying such relationships in the empirical context requires a qualitative methodological approach aimed at carving out subjective experiences, thoughts, perspectives, and feelings, as well as treating the interlocuters as respondents instead of informants. Moreover, a longitudinal approach, i.e., interviewing several respondents extensively over the course of two field trips, was chosen. Finally, an everyday religion approach to present-day Parsi Zoroastrianism is necessary to carve into the layer of people's subjective experiences. My main argument going forward is that the temple fires gain this importance because through processes of ritualization, socialization, personal reflection, and exegesis of texts, they are believed to invite worshippers into meaningful and in some cases long-term personal relationships, as defined in this chapter.

In chapter 2, I will present four individuals through in-depth portraits with a special focus on the characteristics of their relationships with the temple fires. I will devote a separate section to each of them, exploring—among other things—the ways in which their personal and religious lives are tied together in fascinating ways. Digging deep into their life stories and religious experiences, each provides us with clues to understanding just how intimate relationships with temple fires can become.

In chapter 3, I will adopt a broad perspective by exploring how cultural, social, ritual, and material factors and processes contribute to the formation of such relationships. Chapter 4 concludes the book by summarizing key findings.

Chapter 2: The Portraits

> People have complex relationships
> with these agents; they become woven
> into the fabric of everyday life (Cos-
> mides and Tooby 2003, 113).

In this chapter, I present Arnaz, Rustom, Sarosh, and Feroza respectively through in-depth portraits.[1] The portraits contain each individual's perceptions, stories, experiences, feelings, and retrospective reflections related to their lives, supplemented by my own reflections and interpretations. In tune with the main theoretical focus presented in the previous chapter, the content in these portraits revolves around how these four individuals relate (or do not relate) to the consecrated temple fires. In the first portrait, we meet Arnaz, an energetic elderly woman. In addition to meeting several times in more informal settings (e.g., community gatherings), I interviewed Arnaz thrice during my first field trip and twice during the second.[2] In the second portrait, Rustom, a busy bank officer in his thirties, is presented. I had the privilege of interviewing him twice during the first field trip and once during the second.[3] Sarosh, an eccentric head priest who was, at the time, also functioning as the main *boiwalla* in his temple, is presented in portrait three.[4] The fourth and final portrait presents Feroza, a charismatic middle-aged woman. I interviewed her only twice during the first trip.[5]

With an interview sample consisting of fifty-four individual respondents and more than seventy interviews in total, the main challenge in selecting individuals to portrait was not to find relevant and comparable cases but rather to decide which ones *not* to include. The final selections were made based on the following criteria.

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1 See Appendix for shorter presentations of *all* quoted respondents.
2 The first interview lasted one hour and twenty-five minutes, the second one hour and forty minutes, and the third two hours and twenty minutes. The first interview in my second field trip lasted close to an hour and the second interview one hour and twenty minutes. All were conducted in and around the Madressa (either outside or inside).
3 The first interview lasted one hour and fifteen minutes; the second close to an hour; the third lasted fifty minutes. I made his acquaintance in a religious class where I presented the project and indicated that I was looking for respondents for interviews. After class, Rustom drove me (and the teacher) back home, and we arranged to meet up at a later time for an interview. All interviews were held either outside or inside the Madressa.
4 I met Sarosh once, and the interview, which lasted two and a half hours, took place at his home. He was recruited through mail.
5 The first interview lasted one hour and twenty-five minutes and the second around forty minutes. Another respondent suggested that Feroza see me. An appointment we made during the second field trip was canceled due to health issues. Both interviews were held at the Dadar Athornan Madressa.

In addition to seeking a varied sample in relation to gender and age, I chose respondents who were either interviewed more than once (i.e., Feroza), or over both fieldworks (i.e., Arnaz, Rustom), or with whom I had conducted a sufficiently long interview (i.e., Sarosh). This last criterion was important in relation to the genre of writing in-depth portraits. Conducting longer (and multiple) interviews yielded the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and revisit previous answers. Importantly, having several interviews with the same person bolstered mutual trust—so crucial for many respondents' willingness to open up and share stories, experiences, and thoughts freely, including unpleasant and traumatic ones. The portraits are a testament to this latter fact.

As discussed in the previous chapter, notions of relationships are formed on the basis of repeated interactions with the same entity, where the successive interactions have consequences, at least in principle, for future interactions. In other words, they are more than one-time interactions. Personal (and exclusive) relationships are characterized by a distinct interaction pattern among the participants, personal self-disclosure, attachment at an emotional level, and a relational history (i.e., a narrative account of the relationship and its evolution). The way Arnaz, Rustom, and Sarosh conceptualize their interactions with the temple fires and Feroza with the water deity can fruitfully be analyzed as personal relationships.

A main purpose of the portraits is to illustrate how individuals in the same ethno-religious group relate to fires by showcasing both similarities and differences. Arnaz, for example, stresses the importance of self-disclosure within the relationship and perceives herself and the temple fires (almost always in plural) as a kind of equal friends. Rustom, on the other hand, characterizes the fire (almost always in singular) mainly as a boon-giver and compares the relationship between him and his neighborhood fire to a teacher-student or father-son relationship.

Sarosh was chosen owing to his role as both the main fire priest and the head priest of a temple. In line with a relational approach, fire priests are expected to have a close(r) relationship with the temple fire which they tend regularly and to function as (ritual) mediators in laypeople's relationships with the fires. Sarosh provides elaborate reflections on such roles and external expectations.

The case of Feroza provides a different outlook compared to the three others in that she, in addition to having a strong gender perspective, expressed negative (or mixed at best) emotions and experiences in relation to the temple fires throughout (and beyond) the interview process.

What this chapter lacks, one might argue, is a respondent disinterested in religion, which—from a relational perspective—would likely illustrate a non-relation with the fire. Such respondents do exist in the sample, but the interviews with them did not produce sufficient content to be

presented in a similar in-depth way as the ones with these other respondents.[6]

The progression and end result of any interview is colored by the fact that respondents have different personalities and come from different religious, social, and economic backgrounds. The stories that they tell weigh differently on particular components, where what is highly relevant or appropriate for one person is perhaps deemed irrelevant or inappropriate by another. In the case of Arnaz, close family relations are a recurring topic in all interviews, while this is largely absent from the interviews with Rustom. The portraits reflect this situation, and emphasis has been placed on providing the sufficient space for the themes and topics with which the respondent her/himself was essentially concerned.

Regarding structure, each portrait starts with a presentation of the social and religious background of the respondent, from childhood up to present times. This section typically includes topics such as religious identity, personality, and interhuman relations. The other sections are dedicated to other key characteristics of relationships, such as how respondents perceive, judge, and make sense of their interactions with the temple fires, what comparisons and analogies respondents make between their non-human and human relational partners, and how they conceptualize the connection between Ahura Mazda (or God) and the temple fires.

2.1. Portrait word list

The following paragraphs provide a short list of words occurring in one or several of the portraits which have not already or have only briefly been discussed.

Afarganyu: The consecrated temple fire burns on top of a vase (or urn) called an *afarganyu* (PGuj.). One part of the daily work of fire priests is to clean the fire vase (and wash the fire chamber), a duty to which many of my priest respondents attached great significance.

Atash Niyaesh: *Atash Niyaesh* is one of five *Niyaeshe*s, *Khorshed N., Meher N., Mah Bokhtar N.*, and *Ardvi Sura N.* being the other four. Each of these five is addressed to a specific *Yazad*. Together with a set of *yashts* and some other short texts, these five comprise the *Khordeh Avesta* (or "little Avesta"), popularly called the "prayer book."

Ava Yazad: This divinity, also called Ava Ardvisur Banu (or variations thereof), is believed to be the daughter of Ahura Mazda (Boyce 1984), residing in or

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6 In relation to that, the length of the four portraits differs slightly. Both Arnaz and Rustom were interviewed in and over both field trips, and the interviews reached a depth necessitating more space.

presiding over water (see Feroza below). This divinity is celebrated communally during the *Ava Yazad Parabh*, when the day and month dedicated to water coincide (i.e., *Ava Roj, Ava Mahino*). At that time, many Parsis gather by the seaside to worship and praise the water.

Figure 6: Zoroastrians gathering in front of the ocean on Marine Drive (Mumbai) for the celebration of Ava roj, Ava mahino.

Behdin: A *behdin* (Pers., "of the good religion"), is typically used to denote a non-priest or layperson.

Bhikha Behram Well: A large well located in the Fort area close to a main train station (Churchgate), and the oldest fresh water well in Mumbai. As a site of worship for Parsis and Iranis, the well was built in 1725 by Bhikaji Behramji (hence the name). Numerous Parsis, Feroza and Arnaz included, visit this well to ask for blessings and give offerings to Ava Yazad.

Divo: A Parsi Gujarati word denoting an oil lamp (or sometimes a candle or other sources of fire). Most respondents colloquially call it "diva."

Fire chamber: The main room where the consecrated fire is placed in a temple. Common expressions are also the *sanctum sanctorum* (a biblical term meaning "Holy of Holies"), or *qebla* (from the Arabic word *qibla,* referring to the direction one should turn to locate Mecca before prayer). The latter word is also used colloquially to refer to the fire itself.

Frashogard: From the Pahlavi *fraš(a)gird*, *frashogard* (PGuj.), the final "renovation" or "restoration" of the world, "which comes back to its original state of perfection but without the impending presence of Ahreman" (Panaino 2015, 240). The concept is a part of the general Zoroastrian eschatology, and for Khshnoomists *frashogard* is imminent, and the role of fire central: It melts the metal for judgment (Bd. 34. 18) and is part of the last ritual *Yasna* performed by Ahura Mazda, which brings about the separation of good and evil (Bd. 34. 23–32).

Jashan: A *jashan* (Pahl., Pers.) is a ceremony conducted on special occasions, such as on auspicious days. A *jashan* can be a public event, e.g., during the celebration of a fire temple anniversary, or a more private event when priests

conduct the ceremony to celebrate (or bless) a newly built house or the birth of a child. In contrast to so-called "inner liturgies," these ceremonies can be conducted anywhere—but outsiders are still denied participation.

Kusti: The *kusti*, often referred to as the "sacred cord," is made of seventy-two white woolen threads, symbolizing the seventy-two chapters of the Yasna. The cord is tied around the waist.

Machi: A collection of wood (typically dried sandalwood) formed as a throne offered to the fire, most often for *Atash Behram* fires.

Muktad: A religious festival (or commemorative days) devoted to the spiritual well-being of the departed souls (Av. *fravashi*s), who visit the human realm during these ten (previously eighteen) days. These commemorative days are celebrated both in people's private homes and in temples, where the most common practice is to provide fresh flowers in a so-called *muktad* vase, dedicated either to one specific individual or several late family members.

Mobed: In India, "mobed" is a title given to those who complete the second level of priestly training (i.e., *martab*). *Mobed*s are priests eligible to perform "inner rituals," in contrast to *ervad*s, a title given to those priests who have completed the first level of training (i.e., *navar*).

Padshah: A royal title ("Master King") of Persian origin often ascribed to the consecrated fires.

Past Life Regression (PLR): Feroza (see below) is the only respondent who mentions having undergone PLR, a technique using hypnosis to recover memories of past lives or incarnations.

Sudre: Described briefly in chapter 1, the *sudre* is a white muslin shirt (often referred to as the "sacred shirt") to be worn on top of the *kusti* but underneath one's other clothes. The *sudre* together with the *kusti* is received after undergoing the initiation ceremony (*navjote*). Believed to represent Zoroastrian symbols exclusively, both the *kusti* and *sudre* also mark, for many, their ethnic identity. A trend among the respondents was that the younger ones felt using such sacred garments was unpractical and sometimes led to being stigmatized by non-Zoroastrian friends, while the more elderly ones complained that this (i.e., that many younger people did not wear the *kusti* and *sudre* regularly) was in fact one of several signs of the religious decay in the community.

Topi: A Hindi word denoting a hat (or a cap), a *topi* is typically used to cover the head whilst praying, functioning as an ethno-religious identity marker. From a normative perspective, the head should in theory always be covered. Some of my respondents opted to wear it throughout the entire day or during parts of the day, like Rustom did.[7]

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7 On one occasion during my second field trip, I was sharing a cab ride with a couple of Parsi friends on our way to a temple anniversary celebration. The discussion among my three friends was whether we had to make a stop to get me a *topi* since "everyone else would wear one." We

Udvada/Iranshah: The Iranshah (Pers., "King of Iran") *Atash Behram* temple is located in Udvada, a coastal town in Gujarat. The current temple was built in 1742. The Iranshah is considered by many respondents the most holy (and powerful) fire, and some see visiting the Iranshah temple as a kind of pilgrimage. The most vivid descriptions of fires derive from respondents visiting the Iranshah during one of the ritual feedings of the fire, particularly the late-night *Ushahin gah.*

2.2. Arnaz[8]

> Because I need someone to talk things over with, and to me it's very important … You can only bond in a genuine relationship, with a person with whom you can come out with your innermost feelings. And that's the kind of relationship that I have with the holy fires (Arnaz, second interview, 2012).

2.2.1. Personal background

Arnaz, a retired junior officer at a bank and a former teacher at a commercial school, was in her early sixties when I first met her. After the first two years of her life, Arnaz's family migrated to Sri Lanka. She makes occasional references to her education in a Christian convent school, offering glimpses of cross-religious negotiation for a young Parsi Zoroastrian growing up in a largely non-Zoroastrian cultural environment: "I sat in a little chair with a hat of my own, and I did the sign of the cross; I mean it was all part of it. And she [her mother] says: 'No, no, no, no, you don't do that … we're Zoroastrians, so you say Zoroastrian prayers.'" Apart from the strong religious influence of her mother, the lack of a fully consecrated fire temple made occasional *jashan*s the only external exposure to Zoroastrianism. She recalls how, upon her arrival in India at the age of eight, she did not know "how to bow down in a fire temple." The feeling of otherness in the midst of apparent familiarity was strengthened

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decided not to go to more trouble since my looks would already reveal my outsider identity. Not all participants wore *topi*s at the function, so the socio-religious stigma felt less pressing.

8 In a letter dated February 16th, 2015, Arnaz responded to the draft of the portrait which she had received. In addition to a ten-page response, the envelope also contained small gifts—fittingly a few pieces of sandalwood. Parts of her feedback have been included in the text and highlighted to distinguish it from the interview material.

at her new Parsi school, where she found that even non-Parsi children had *topi*s on and knew the Avestan prayers better than she did.

Today, Arnaz stresses how she is a Parsi Zoroastrian both by birth and by choice: "[I]f today I'm a Zoroastrian—a Parsi of course I am—it is because out of sheer conviction. I'm so convinced about whatever I follow because I don't believe in following things blindly." As a Zoroastrian, she explains, she prays before the fire and follows the rituals "as best as I can." The challenge is that some of these rituals are not very practical. Having a bath before going to the fire temple can be impractical in the midst of everyday hassle, and making compromises is inevitable [Arnaz comments: "I certainly have a full *body* bath; I may not have a *head* bath as well"].

Arnaz labels herself as orthodox, defined in her own words as "a person who follows the rules and law laid down." She rejects a "reformist" attitude and "change for the sake of change." I occasionally met Arnaz at academic talks on Zoroastrianism, held increasingly frequently, but she also attends courses on other religions on a regular basis. Arnaz distinguishes between intellectual curiosity and ritual commitment in approaching other religions, where going to non-Zoroastrian talks is not deemed inappropriate but taking part in their rituals or "paying obeisance" is. Her loyalty is with the fires. [Arnaz comments: "For that matter, any religion's place of worship. After all, in India places of worship are on the itinerary of any tourist. Though personally, I have hardly traveled in India"].

Another characteristic of Arnaz's view of religion in general is that she frequently appeals to science, often scientific experiments, to argue for a certain religious viewpoint, in particular the (scientific) validity of Zoroastrian prayers and rituals: "Zoroastrianism, as I see it," she declares, "is based on science."

From the connection between science and religion, we turn to Arnaz's familial relations—a recurring theme throughout all five interviews (as well as many of our informal conversations outside of the more formal interview structure). Arnaz comes across, and typically refers to herself, as "open-minded," but only up to a certain point. That "point" is when her religious views conflict with the views of her human companions. As noted, the concept of "marrying out" is one of many ongoing and heated topics of debate in the community discourse on (religious) identity and related issues. The issue essentially concerns the question of who is (not) a Parsi, with the privileges that derive from the identity, especially entrance to the fire temple. Considering the issue, Arnaz metaphorically likens the present Parsi community to a building whose edifice has become fragile, where "every brick counts," and is concerned that the same people (i.e., those who marry non-Zoroastrians) insist on being allowed entry to the fire temple. She illustrates the point by sharing a story about one of her colleagues' marriage to a Catholic. He was left alone outside the temple during his wife's funeral ceremony, "with a bunch of flowers, waiting for some Parsi to put the flowers

for [her] *muktad* [vase]." While sympathizing with her Catholic friend, Arnaz concludes: "I mean human beings are nice, but then these are the rules of [the] religion."

This particular issue has had a divisive impact on her family as well. One after the other is marrying out, Arnaz explains, and when the invitations come, she refuses to go. Not attending the ceremony, however, comes at an emotional cost: "Because those people are dear to me, I mean why would they invite me otherwise? It's not just a formality, and they are my family." In this particular issue, asking a priest she knew for advice did not help either. His suggestion that she cut off all relations was not worth following. "It's easier said than done," she starts, "and the people who said that don't have children. It's very easy to say that, [and] in the good old days they did that." In contrast to her close family members, Arnaz's friends have by and large accepted her viewpoints, while "some have thought I'm going overboard, and [that has] sort of severed relations—but so be it." At the end of our third interview during the first field trip, Arnaz makes it clear that for as long as her mother was around, she would not marry a non-Parsi, "simply because I loved my mother, and I would not want to hurt her" [Arnaz comments: "My mother's memory is too precious; I doubt whether even if she were not around I would have"].

At the very beginning of our first interview, Arnaz discloses that she goes to self-improvement classes to curb her quick temper, motivated to overcome and understand behavior related to her father before he died. He was someone with whom she was always at loggerheads, given they were both quick-tempered. "To be very frank," she says, "to his dying day, I didn't speak to him. It was that bad, I mean I was that bad. I'm trying to get over that." This was but the first indication of a somewhat complex and bothersome relationship in Arnaz's portrayal of her family history.

When comparing family members, Arnaz typically refers to religious commitment and a lack thereof, perhaps because of my presence and purpose as a scholar (of religion). Her husband, she concludes, is "not at all devout, he's very much like my father," describing him as an "ignoramus" in religious matters. She reports numerous heated discussions and fights in the home sphere over religious matters leading her to conclude, somewhat disheartened: "I don't know how pairs are made!"

While being on "parallel tracks" with her husband, Arnaz experienced her relationship with her mother as the exact opposite. In stark contrast to her father, her mother is portrayed as an "extremely devout soul": She placed great emphasis on prayer, visited the fire temple on a regular basis, and always wore the *sudre* and *kusti*. Her relationships with her mother and husband seem to serve as prototypes of good and bad ones respectively. Arnaz's circle drawings illustrate the fact.

The most striking difference is the gap between the circles. I first ask Arnaz to elaborate on the depiction of her relationship with her father (figure 7), and she responds: "*Grr*, I never got along with him, so if the paper were longer and
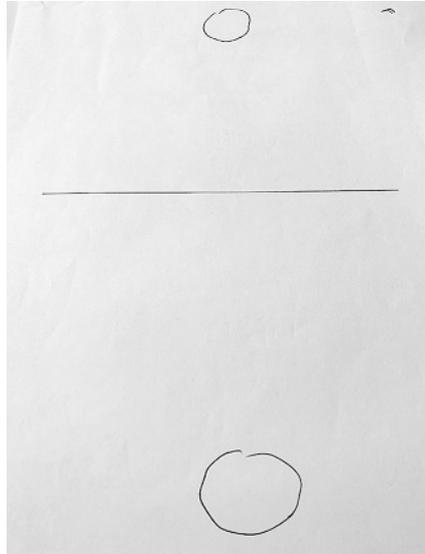
Figure 7: Arnaz's representation of her relationship with her father (2nd field trip).
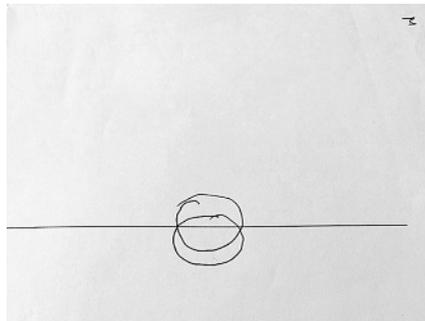
Figure 8: Arnaz's representation of her relationship with her mother (2nd field trip).

bigger, maybe it would have been even further away." But then, in one of the few instances when Arnaz speaks positively about her father, she declares: "In retrospect I [pause] fine, he was dominating and strict, but he had our good at heart, which I didn't see at that time." Meanwhile, when asked about her mother's drawing (figure 8), she points out: "There is no demarcation; I mean I could have made the circle anywhere," and continues, "I was very close to her, but still we managed to sort of keep ourselves not aloof, I mean we didn't become one—it's not as if, you know, sort of, she imposed." Arnaz consistently points out how her mother was a major influence in her religious development, describing her as "appreciative" and "encouraging," and their

relationship as emotionally satisfying. Their relationship enabled Arnaz to offload emotions, feelings, and problems. Even though her mother was not always thought to solve the problems, she would at least provide the right perspective going forward. We will shortly discover that Arnaz finds the same qualities in, and when relating to, the temple fires.

Her mother's death had a lasting impact on Arnaz, constituting a "turning point" in her life. For as long as she was alive, Arnaz would compromise on her own feelings to uphold the family unit and keep the peace in the house. It was only after her mother's death that she critically questioned her role in the family:

I take my own life in my own stride, and what do I do about it? I mean it sounds very simple; it was a very difficult kind of a process. Now, I *don't* want people's company, as I say: "[If] you want company, I'm there; [if] you don't want company, I'm not there." And [my husband and I] we're on parallel tracks, you know … and I don't think that's a relationship. The word "relationship," when you define it—to me it's communication.

A part of the sentiment in the above quote is, as we will see, typical of Arnaz: First she declares that she does not want other people's company only to then immediately change her mind, concluding that she does in fact want it. Another development arising from her mother's passing is that she was "drawn more towards religion." In response to her mother's death, Arnaz slowly drifted away from her immediate family and into the fire temple. There, in front of the fire, Arnaz was able to establish that essential line of communication which she firmly believes to be the key element of any kind of relationship, not exclusively interhuman ones.

2.2.2. Arnaz and her fires

The way Arnaz describes the experiences, thoughts, and feelings connected to the temple fires displays all the ingredients of a personal relationship as defined in chapter 1. The following paragraphs outline important components in the relational history of the emergence of a long-term and emotionally satisfying relationship, which flourished in the aftermath of her mother's death. Arnaz's life story illustrates how human relations can both be affected by and have an impact on relationships with non-human entities.

"I wanted to relate to somebody."

It is early on in the first interview. I ask Arnaz whether she visits the fire temple in Udvada. It was during her regular trips with her husband in the early stages of their relationship that she "built a bond" with the Iranshah fire, she

responds. The first trace of what was to become a personal relationship, and the initial point of a relational narrative, was a notion of bonding with the Iranshah fire, on trips she made with her husband. It was only later in life, this time related to the *loss* of one interhuman relationship, that the reported bond gradually acquired the characteristics of a personal relationship. "So, I think the turning point in my life would be after I lost my mother, and I had to relate to *somebody* at that level. And that's when I sort of turned to the fires with more devotion." Arnaz refers to this specific period of her life several times throughout the interviews, highlighting the loss of a significant person and the emotionally satisfying relationship with her, to the gradual emergence of a new kind of connection providing similar benefits. "I wanted to relate to somebody," Arnaz says, "and I found that I could relate to the fire … It started off with all the pent-up feelings of maybe sorrow or whatever, but it gradually built up like a relationship." Before that, Arnaz remarks, her visits to the fire temple were more "mandatory."

At the end of our third and last interview during the first field trip, Arnaz reflects on why this relation with the holy fires became so instrumental. "I think it's the most wonderful thing that has ultimately happened. I mean if I had this very nice, sweet, cozy relationship in the family, I doubt very much that I would have had this very cozy, sweet, one-to-one relationship … with the holy fire." As noted, Arnaz indicates that losing her mother meant not only missing an important person, but also being deprived of a unique kind of relationship—a relationship apparently not readily available within her family at the time. Furthermore, the vacuum that was created in the aftermath of her mother's death was slowly filled by a new and similar kind of relationship, but with a relational partner of a different kind. The fires became the source of unconditional support for which she longed:

A relationship that never goes awry; I can just offload [and] unload. And, you know, he seems to listen, and I seem to get that kind of very consoling, I can't say exactly … it's a very sort of, very personal connection, no miracles so to say. Very satisfying, I mean I've never ever been disappointed after leaving a fire temple. If I've gone with the problem, the problem remains, but my acceptance level, [and] threshold—ok, it's increased.

Described here is a close-knit, stable, and emotionally rewarding relationship characterized by confidence, providing the same emotional and cognitive benefits and serving a social function similar to that of her mother. A key component for Arnaz in any good relationship is confidence. Arnaz values how her mother was appreciative and encouraging, and their relationship was one providing her with a social space to offload her innermost feelings and thoughts to a trustworthy partner. The same characteristics are found in Arnaz's description of her relationship with the temple fires.

"I want to share things with the fire."

Self-disclosure is one ingredient of personal relationships, a quality which Arnaz values in interhuman relationships as well as in her interaction with the fires: "I mean the closer you are in a relationship, you're comfortable … you're free; free in the sense [that] you can offload your deeper emotions, [and] your inner feelings—there are no reservations." By connecting a (comfortable) relationship with the opportunity to self-disclose unrestricted, Arnaz here implicitly links what she shares with the fires to her mother.

Availability is important in attempts to disclose. Interaction with both humans and the temple fires are hampered by different kinds of limitations. To illustrate the point, Arnaz provides a hypothetical situation where she wants to call up a friend to "offload something" when in need of "support." That person, however, is busy watching television: "And I know *ki*[9] she's so interested in that serial. I mean, I wouldn't want to sort of, you know, force myself." In contrast to the regular friend, the fires are more than ready to listen: "I mean [the fire is] ever at, what should I say, at my service so to say … I wouldn't say service, it sounds like, you know—but it's always there … Only when the fire temple's locked, that's it—that's the only limitation." Arnaz stops and hesitates when using the word "service," seemingly indicating that it might make her relationship with the fires sound too one-sided and perhaps instrumental. In contrast to her human peers, there are seemingly no emotional but only physical barriers when relating to fires.

Another development in Arnaz's relationship with the fires is connected to her frequenting the temple. When we start the third interview, she wants to clarify something: "I mean over all these years as a Zoroastrian and my relationship to the fires … and the frequency as to when I go to them and all that changes, I suppose you appreciate that, right?" The daily trips she made during the early period of the relationship have, due to aging, forced her to visit the temple less regularly. I ask her if she consequently misses the fire: "If I am feeling sad or low or something, and I want to get it off my chest, then I feel lonely and I would go to the fire. But even otherwise, when things are fine, I still miss the fire if it's been some days when I've not been to it." Taken together, the quotes presented so far indicate that Arnaz's main motivation to visit the temple in the first place is to confide—in her own words, to get things off her chest. While frustrations associated with her interhuman relationships seem to be a major topic in her interaction with the fires, she is keen to point out that she also shares the more positive things as well. Finally, even though it is not obvious from the quote alone, it is reasonable to suggest that the reported feeling of loneliness arises as a consequence of not having anyone in her

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9 The word "*ki*" is invariably used by my respondents which translates to the English noun clause conjunction "that."

immediate surroundings in whom to confide—a point which she stresses quite often.

Earlier we saw how Arnaz described her relationship with the temple fires as one that never goes awry. The social space created within the confines of the temple, where she can offload, becomes the benchmark for a satisfying relationship:

Ehm, because I need someone to talk things over with, and to me it's very important. I find that people in any relationship, a person who just blocks a person out, you can't have a relationship … You can only bond in a genuine relationship, with a person with whom you can come out with your innermost feelings. And that's the kind of relationship that I have with the holy fires.

For Arnaz, the loss of her mother created a void which she felt needed to be filled by such a personal relationship with a trustworthy companion. No one in her social surroundings is able to fulfill this role like the temple fires. As a relational entity, the main characteristic or role seems to be a kind of an empathic and non-judgmental *listener*, offering emotional well-being. The following paragraphs deal more directly with the way Arnaz *interacts* with the fires.

"A kind of a monologue"

Interaction patterns, both similar and dissimilar, develop as respondents relate to the fires. In Arnaz' case, this pattern is described by using a mix between typically religious modes, such as different kinds of prayers and ways of praying, and more general modes such as listening, thinking, asking, and answering.

For Arnaz, to "pray" or "recite" formal Avestan prayers is imperative and "mandatory." She reports praying daily at home, feeling a discomfort if something impedes her need to do so. The temple, however, is the best option because it reduces the risk of being disturbed—especially by mobile phones, a constant source of frustration for Arnaz. Mobile phones can disturb the "connection" which she is trying to establish with the fires through prayers. Arnaz seemingly uses the words "relate" or "connect" as synonyms for praying. "I don't know all my prayers by heart, but I feel the need to pray, to relate." With certain fires, she explains, this "connect comes immediately," but most of the time it takes a while: "I mean, if I sit there praying and praying and praying, and then I get that connect."

Admittedly influenced by the Khshnoom perspective, Arnaz connects reciting formal prayers to sound "vibrations" (and "energy"). Avestan, the sacred prayer language, has, in her view, its own vibrations and effects in that it "forms colors around you, it affects your aura, it cleanses your aura." The priest has a say in how successful such an attempt to interact turns out. "I

somehow can link better if the priest prays properly, and clearly, loudly." Some priests do it "functionally," others with more "devotion."

When asked to describe how she interacts with the fires, she stresses that it is a thought process without audibility: "I mean it's not as if I talk, it's just thoughts." When I ask her whether it is a "kind of conversation," she rather switches the perspective to a "monologue," but later on she changes it again, this time to a dialogue: "You're having a kind of a monologue that is actually a dialogue without words because you're getting your answers—in your own words." In other words, it is a kind of thought process in a dialogical form, where responses from the fires will eventually come, but not necessarily as clear-cut answers.

A few respondents, e.g., Feroza, probe for responses by watching the movements of the fire awaiting a visual sign in the form of a flare-up of flames or an audible sign such as a sudden and loud spark. Arnaz is acquainted with the idea, but not in favor of it: "I mean some people say a flame shot up and I got my answer, 'yes or no,' [but] no—no flame shoots up. And I don't see anything like that." But the answers do come, in due time. "Maybe years later, but everything falls into place; it does." She continues: "And I know if I surrender completely, sometimes it will come out in twelve minutes, sometimes in twelve years. But it does! So, the sooner I give up, surrender completely, not [only] 99,99%, and the fire says: 'Ok, carry on.'" As seen, the lag between question and answer can be considerable, but the answer does eventually come. Moreover, responses from the fires are seemingly dependent on self-efforts before and during the thought process. Besides the feeling of being understood, what kind of answers to what kind of questions Arnaz gets is not easy to extract from the interviews.

A characteristic part of Indian religiosity in general—including Parsi Zoroastrianism—is engaging with superhuman beings asking for favors, boons, or blessings of material or immaterial nature. Many respondents report that they visit the temple to ask the temple fires for good exam grades, successful job applications, and good health to name a few. Some fires have a reputation of being more effective in granting wishes and boons than others. Arnaz stresses repeatedly that she does *not* go to the temple to ask for boons, noting that she used to do so when she was younger and had exams coming up. Discussing the topic of why people are motivated to go to the fire temple to ask for boons, Arnaz touches upon the topic of sandalwood:

Would I come with all these kinds of stuff? I give you this and, you know, big, big pieces of sandalwood and all that … It's not a question of you giving a big piece and my giving a small piece, or the fire's going to give you better results. If you haven't worked enough, you won't get your results.

Arnaz emphasizes that offering sandalwood depends on the quality of the person and personal effort and not on the quantity. Just giving sandalwood is not enough, however; the right intention (with "faith" and "devotion") is

important as well. Instead of buying many sticks, Arnaz opts for good-quality ones because "the holy fire knows *ki* I bought it from there in all good faith." Arnaz then comes back to how she eventually "outgrew" going to the temple to ask for favors and boons, and that she now goes exclusively to pray:

A simple analogy they've given, that wouldn't you telephone a friend? And if you've been in contact with that friend, that friend would sort of be closer to you? But if you only contact a friend when there's a need, he'll help you probably, sure he will. But then, isn't that [a] very selfish act? I mean, do you only pray when you need help? You pray daily because you feel good [doing it].

Going to the temple, from her perspective, is as much about emotional well-being as it is about receiving material boons. In the fifth and last interview with Arnaz, she herself brings up this topic again, admitting she does indeed ask the fire for something, but stresses that that "something" is not material things:

I realized, yes of course I ask. There are two statements that I make: One is I mention like, you know that, "may our souls progress." And then I mention mommy, father, whoever … The second thing before *leaving* the fire temple, I actually say, you know, like, "Thank you for bringing me here, and if it be Thy will, bring me again" [Arnaz comments: "May *their* souls progress," i.e., the deceased. "I remember their *fravashi*s and pray for the progress of their souls"].

Asking is one thing, but from her point of view, sharing is something different.

By way of a summary, we have so far seen Arnaz reflecting on the key moments in the relational history between herself and the holy temple fires, key characteristics of this relationship in terms of confidence and emotional support, and finally facets in the interaction pattern between her and the fires. Most respondents, Arnaz included, in some way link the consecrated temple fires to Ahura Mazda. How this relation is perceived varies. In some interviews, Ahura Mazda (or God) is rarely—if ever—mentioned; in others, God remains the main focus. For Arnaz, Ahura Mazda constitutes the ultimate relational reference and end point of prayers.

"But I look upon God as a friend."

One pattern in the first interview is how Arnaz often switches from answering a question about the fire by ending it referring to Ahura Mazda (or "God"). When describing her bond with the Iranshah fire, Arnaz says, "My relationship with God is a sort of a very casual, friendly thing." Another instance is when I ask her to elaborate on something she calls a feeling of "communion" experienced when standing in front of the fire. After elaborating on how she only learned late in life that the *Atash Niyaesh* actually referred to the fire as a friend, she concludes: "But I look upon God as a friend."

Later on during the first interview, she concludes: "I have a very comfortable relationship with God, and a very cozy, comfortable relationship with the holy fire—very accommodating." In contrast to the quotes above, Arnaz here makes a somewhat clearer distinction between two relationships (and/or entities). It is not until late in the first interview that I ask Arnaz explicitly about this topic. Judging by her answer, one might infer that her apparent heightened awareness of the distinction was because I had earlier brought the topic to her attention. "Yeah, now that you ask, it's supposed to be the son of Ahura Mazda," she says, "but every time I look at the fire …" She interrupts her own train of thoughts: "Yes, in the prayer it's there, it's all mentioned … but I mean I don't keep thinking that it's God or this thing." The response perhaps shows that Arnaz has not only been primed by my question, but that she also acknowledges her interpretation of the theological position on the matter. She ends this line of reasoning by concluding, somewhat disgruntled by the amount of time we spent pursuing this topic, saying: "It's all the same to me! I can't really distinguish between the two!" Judging by this quote alone, it is difficult to decipher whether the comparison is based on the fire's distinct agency as an entity from an ontological perspective or her relationship with it. [Arnaz comments: "In this physical world, the Holy Fire *represents* God (not a symbol). I need to focus on something through my physical senses, on something formless (pure light-energy)]."

The second interview picked up where the first one had left off. While discussing a trip she made to Udvada between the interviews, she mentioned that she had not been able to do the *Atash Niyaesh* during one temple visit; an incident which did not lead to feelings of guilt, Arnaz states, because "the fire understands," and "I don't believe that God punishes, I don't feel guilty. I mean, I have a very nice, friendly, friendly relationship with God," adding in quick succession, "and the fires." Again, it seems that Arnaz has become more aware of the distinction which she reckons that I have been suggesting through our interactions (see chapter 3 for discussion).

An addition to the second interview is the concept of the fire being a *link* between the physical and the spiritual or metaphysical world. I point out to Arnaz how she often changes, in a split second, from fire to God, and ask her whether this is something she consciously does. She explains how she has, since last time we met, reflected on the issue, and has come "a little prepared." This is typical of Arnaz, who consciously used the interviews as a resource which allowed her to reflect on religious matters prompted by questions from an outsider. As of now, she states, "I look upon it in another way, as my *link* between the physical and metaphysical; to me it's the link." A trip to the fire temple is the link "with God," and the fire is "my link with God addressed through this consecrated fire." In other words, God constitutes the ultimate relational reference and end point of prayers.

Later in the interview, I ask her if there is a difference between praying in the temple and praying at home. When praying at home, she responds, "I think

I'm talking to Ahura Mazda." After a brief pause, she says: "Yeah, you have a point, a point of distinction. Yeah, when I go and stand before a fire, I'm speaking to the fire, and to God—*through* the fire! When I sit at home and pray, it's not as if I am visualizing any fire. To me at that point of time, now that you've asked this question, I'm speaking to God." Judging by the tone of her voice, it is as if Arnaz here recognizes a "problem," however temporary it might turn out to be. The last parts of my last two interviews with her during the first field trip were in fact used by Arnaz to reflect on this "problem." Even though she is of the impression that Ahura Mazda is the recipient of prayers, our discussions have made her acutely aware of how she reasons about this particular issue—a fact which she actively uses when reflecting on the manner. "I mean I tell sort of the holy fire or God—now you will ask me whom exactly; I don't know … When I don't know for sure if this is the thing or that is the thing, what is right—I just tell the holy, I tell God through the holy fires that." When I interrupt her to point out that she switched from the holy (indicating the fire) to God, she responds:

Yes, I did. I really don't know. But that's when I sit in the *agiary*, so I am talking to the holy fire. But the holy fire is the link; I'm talking to God, and God sends his answers to the holy fire. And the answers are what work out in my life. I tell God, yeah, I tell God, yes, I am talking to God, actually, through the holy fires. But I need to sit before the holy fire.

Her last sentence shows that this connection is not as straightforward as it might seem. While God is perhaps the supreme divine agent, the fire is necessary in order to approach this superior agent. To describe this relationship further, Arnaz searches for a proper metaphor. The fire, she says, is "my little sounding board," and a "little telephone which connects me to God." Why does Arnaz feel that she needs this telephone?

Throughout the interviews, Ahura Mazda is described as "endless space," with "no boundaries" and "physical form," or as "limitless, infinite light." As Arnaz explains, "as an ordinary human, simple human being, I do need to relate to *something*." This something is the temple fires, and to establish the connection with Ahura Mazda, she needs that specific "connect" which the fires provide: "I *feel* that need to connect, I need something in front of me, something that I can relate to. An emotional need maybe? A psychological need?" The fact that Ahura Mazda is invisible makes the relationship a tough call. The fires, present and readily available for relating, become this sounding board.

A further illustration of the difficulties involved in asking respondents about this particular relationship is provided by how Arnaz "solves" and reflects on the drawing exercise. Right at the end of the third (and last) interview during the first field trip, I ask Arnaz to represent her relationship with the fires by drawing two circles (figure 9).

Arnaz elaborates: "This is it. But I can't draw it very nicely, it's just *one* circle—that's it, that's me and my holy fire." Arnaz also points out that she
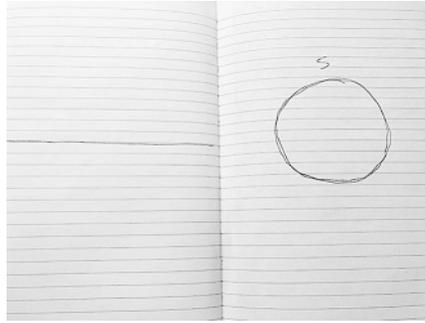
Figure 9: Arnaz's representation of her relationship with the fires (1ˢᵗ field trip).

found the line drawn on the first page frustrating, so she opted to use the "blank" page instead.

At the beginning of the first interview during the second field trip, one and a half years later, I ask Arnaz to represent her relationship with Ahura Mazda by applying the same set-up one last time (figure 10).
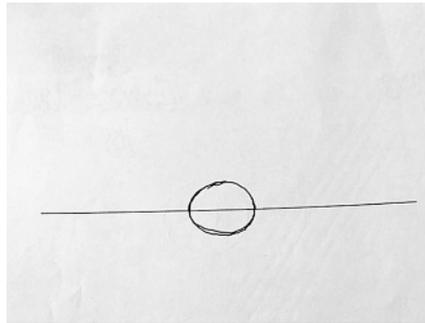
Figure 10: Arnaz's representation of her relationship with Ahura Mazda (2ⁿᵈ field trip).

I ask Arnaz to elaborate on the drawing: "I would love to be just, you know, one with Him. Of course, it's a long way to go, but then I would like to reach this stage." At this point, I ask Arnaz whether she remembers doing something similar the last time we met a couple of years earlier. "Yes! You had asked me about the holy fire, I remember." I then ask her if she remembers what she drew then: "Yeah, yeah. Not exactly circle over circle, I don't think so, but there was a line, and I was wondering whether it was supposed to be [pause] … Wait a minute, what did I do [pause]? It was in an exercise book with lines, I remember. So, you'd asked me, right?" In other words, Arnaz remembers how

she was frustrated by the ruled paper. I subsequently ask her to do the same exercise with the fire again (figure 11).
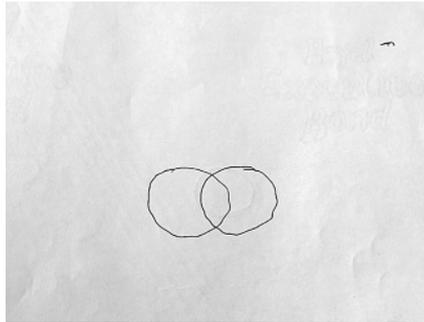
Figure 11: Arnaz's representation of her relationship with the fires (2nd field trip).

"Ok, my relationship towards fire. Though it's supposed to be Ahura Mazda, I would like to sort of be, you know, hand in hand kind of a thing … a friendship, a companionship." In other words, it seems that the willingness to distinguish how she perceives her relationship with Ahura Mazda and the fires respectively in a way originated as a response to my probes, or at least that the difference between her first drawing of her relationship with the fires contra the second comes as a consequence of her willingness to distinguish between the two.

The final section deals more elaborately with how Arnaz contrasts her interhuman relations with the bond she sees developing with the temple fires. It is through such comparisons that the distinctive character of both the temple fires as relational entities and the relationship itself comes to the forefront.

"Human relationships do have their limitations."

Relating to non-human entities comes easy to Arnaz. She continuously stresses her love for animals, especially dogs (we laughingly agreed at one point that we both shared an affinity toward dogs and felt the opposite about cats). Beside the interviews, such affinity toward animals also became apparent when we made a few shorter walks through one of the main Parsi colonies and a longer trip outside of the city. Arnaz is still greatly concerned with animal welfare and connects her attempt to stay vegetarian, and possibly become vegan someday, to that concern—not religion. "I've become a vegetarian because I'm an animal lover," she says, adding, "[the choice has] nothing to do with Zoroastrianism."

That Arnaz has a great affinity toward animals entails a relational dimension in that she often points out that she connects better to animals

than most humans. "I don't get along with human beings," Arnaz suddenly exclaims, "I get along with animals wonderfully—dogs and other animals." Immediately after, she retracts and says, "[I have got] nothing against human beings—I get along well with them. But if I disagree, then I open my big mouth and that causes a lot of problems." Arnaz never really seems to make up her mind whether she really needs human company or whether she feels that she really gets along with human beings. Regardless, this kind of statement and its immediate retraction is typical of Arnaz and the way she reasons along the way. Moreover, it seems as though it is not necessarily humans in and of themselves but rather the possibility of disagreement and lack of understanding that prompts her to perceive the issue this way.

As we have seen, Arnaz's social world is torn between the commitments of family relationships on the one hand and religious viewpoints on the other. During the first interview, I ask her to compare her human to non-human relationships, in particular with regards to the fires. "Oh, my relationship with the fire is top-most … I mean, that's *the* relationship. I don't know, I mean if [one of] my family members earths,"[10] she interrupts herself and goes on to talk about how frustrated she becomes when so many of her family members decide to marry non-Parsis.

I notice this specific point and ask whether there can be problems with the fire: "No, I've never thought of it, I've never had a problem, I've never had a problem … I feel he knows the best. Why *he*, it could be a *she?* No, I have no problems with the fire, absolutely none. I've never thought of it." Arnaz was one of the few respondents who provided a gendered perspective and kept questioning the fire's gender throughout the interviews. It is difficult to know whether this sentiment is born of her general inability to relate to or bond with men in general, but suffice it to say that to Arnaz relating is not limited to humans, and she seems to be well prepared to bond with the non-human world, not only gods and holy temple fires. In any case, the ability (and need) to relate is not dependent on an ontological likeness. As she says, "When I say 'relate,' I mean that kind of a bond. And I mean it doesn't necessarily have to be a 'him' or a 'her' or something like that, just as I spontaneously sort of can relate to animals. [It] doesn't necessarily have to be my pet dog or my pet horse or whatever."

According to Arnaz, feeling "free" with people is important in friendships, an openness that enables her to "sort of pour your heart out, they don't have to be judgmental or anything. That's the kind of a feeling that I feel should be in a friendship." While she would feel free to project her thoughts to the fire, she would have certain reservations toward her human friends. As seen, this aspect of feeling free enough to offload and disclose is one of the things Arnaz emphasizes and values in her relationship with the fires. When I ask her how she can be "close" to the fire, she responds:

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10 Arnaz uses this as a synonym for dying.

I can cry before the fire when I'm very unhappy, and the fire understands. I can be excited about something and share with the fire. I mean, I don't really, now, at this stage, need another human being; I feel … it's good to have another human being, to whom you can relate to … You can be alone, but you don't feel lonely: That's my relationship with the holy fire. I don't necessarily feel that I always need human company, now, to be able to get out my innermost feelings. That makes it a very—it's a wonderful comfort zone for me.

One of the important characteristics of this relationship from Arnaz's perspective is not only that she is able to address her problems, but that it also creates a social space in which to share excitement. Arnaz is quite explicit that this relationship fulfills many functions which she typically reserves for ordinary human relationships, particularly that with her mother, in that she does not need human company anymore, although she moderates herself towards the end, as she often does.

Arnaz's relationship with fires is "absolutely different," because in human friendships there will always be a gap or boundary, a limit to the degree of how much people can understand and how much empathy and sympathy one can get. Arnaz points out the limits an interhuman relationship can set not only communicatively, but also in relation to empathy:

Has a person understood you, completely, totally? Not just the words, I mean, or is— could it be that they have taken it in a different way? Or maybe they haven't taken in a different way, but they can relate to you just that much? The sympathy, the empathy would be just that much? The boundary between [you and] one human being, however close you are, would be just that much?

A characteristic of interhuman relationships from Arnaz's viewpoint is that humans bring into the mix their own individual perspectives and ways of acting and feeling, and this opens up the possibility of misunderstandings and varying degrees of empathy. The same limitation does not seem to characterize her relationship to the fires:

I mean the difference between humans and fire would be, holy fires would be; a fire would understand me in totality, a human being [only] to the extent I'm able to put across and whatever I want to put across. So I don't think a human being would be able to understand me totally, however close the human being is.

Interhuman communication is limited because the message is open to interpretation and therefore misunderstandings. "I don't think there's any, any chance, any occasion for the fire to ever misunderstand you, ever! Relationships, human relationships do have their limitations." This complete level of understanding is made possible by a trait typically attributed to the fires: full access to the mind of the worshipper. "The holy fires know, I don't have to necessarily verbalize or whatever the word is. [The fire] knows everything because Ahura Mazda knows everything, so I don't have to act or

stand before the fire and sort of, tell my tales of war." Friends, on the other hand, would have to tell them: "I mean, how else could you understand?" That is a barrier the fire does not share in Arnaz's opinion.

2.3. Rustom[11]

> It's a very *holy* fire, and when you see something so pious, when you see something so holy, you know, naturally from within yourself you want to talk to it, you want to, you know, bow in front of it, you want to respect it and get that connect going! (Rustom, second interview, 2012)

2.3.1. Personal background

Rustom, a successful and busy chartered accountant, was in his mid-thirties when I first met him. He comes from a priestly family and was ordained as a *mobed* at the age of fifteen, after receiving informal training from a priest known to his family.

His family is, according to Rustom, "largely orthodox," something he defines as living "as for the tenets of the religion, in harmony with the modern world." In addition to wearing the *sudre* and *kusti* and praying at least two to three times a day, an important part of being a Zoroastrian for Rustom is to be "honest," "charitable," and "righteous." He also underlines non-affiliation with other religions as an important part of his religious identity: "I also actively [and] personally try and avoid or completely avoid affiliations to any other sect or any other kind of, you know, priests and saints of other religions." In contrast to Arnaz, at least when it comes to drawing on religious teachings or techniques, Rustom has a less lenient attitude toward other religions, referring to non-affiliation as a sign of commitment to his own religion.

Rustom repeatedly mentions that he wants to learn and impart knowledge about Zoroastrianism to others around him. In this regard, Rustom draws an analogy between himself and the fire at the end of the first interview:

So, I want to align myself to that saying that in my own way I want to show light and direction to people … And hopefully, if I can also with my understanding, with my

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11 In an email exchange on May 4th, 2015, Rustom responded to the portrait draft which he had received. In contrast to Arnaz, Rustom only had some brief comments, simply writing: "I have read [the draft], and it's OK to go head."

knowledge, with my studies, if I can, you know, generate that people should be more good and, you know, move away from these evil forces from themselves.

Thirst for knowledge is one of several reasons Rustom gave for agreeing to meet me in the first place. He also speaks of his career throughout the interviews and emphasizes how much he values his family life. In general, he has a positive outlook on life. With "God's grace," he reasons, "I'm well educated, I've got a great job, got a great family, very little reason for me to be unhappy about [anything]." Rustom rarely makes any references to his family members throughout the interviews—perhaps because his familial relations, in contrast to Arnaz's, seem relatively uncomplicated (and positive). He relates his role as a parent to his religious identity, where one goal is to transmit religious teachings to his children, "so that they invite those qualities as well and, you know, are true Zoroastrians." One arena for passing on these values and qualities is the fire temple:

So they know that when we enter the fire temple, prior to entering the fire temple, you go to buy sandalwood. They would usually wait for me to buy the sandalwood. We all walk together and then wash our hands and get and do our *kusti*. After which they would want to go and, you know, offer the sandalwood to the fire. They have now started to learn bits about the prayers, as in they're learning the prayers, they do have a book, and they start praying independently now; earlier they used to chant after me. Now they have the books … so they can pray themselves. So, I guess … they partly learn at home, and partly when they go to the temple, they see people around, they're able to learn.

This description illustrates that for Rustom (like most other respondents), the temple functions as an important space for religious transmission both from parent to child and from observation of the larger socio-religious environment in the temple itself. The temple was also where Rustom met his wife, something Rustom interprets as a sign from God: "So I somehow believe that there is the—you know, a hand in God helping us get together at the fire temple. Because if I hadn't been praying there, you know, she wouldn't have seen me, neither would I have seen her."

It is not until the third and last interview, when asked to undertake the drawing exercise, that Rustom reflects on his relationship with his father and mother (figures 12 and 13 respectively).

In the first drawing, depicting Rustom's relationship with his father, the circles are both placed on the line, but he has made his father's circle comparatively bigger. They are kept on line because Rustom, in his own words, wants to "represent the fact that it's not that I'm subservient or superior to my father." In other words, Rustom uses the line to represent a sense of equality in status but manipulates the size of the circles to represent that he still sees his father at another level in terms of life experience—a level Rustom strives to achieve. "I do believe," Rustom explains, "that there's a lot that I need to learn
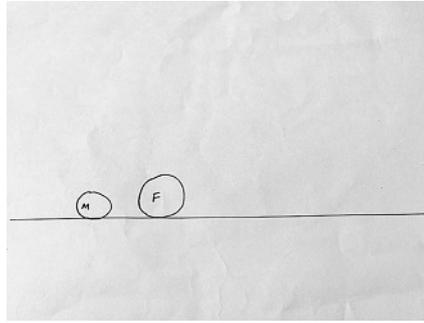
Figure 12: Rustom's representation of his relationship with his father (2nd field trip).
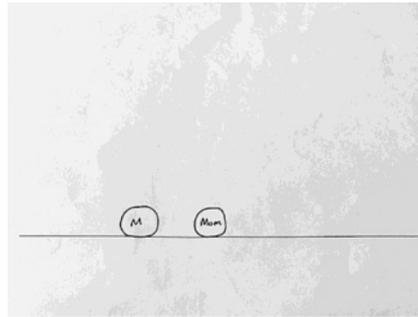
Figure 13: Rustom's representation of his relationship with his mother (2nd field trip).

from him yet." In his depiction of his relationship with his mother, the circles are, in contrast, equal in size: "Yeah, here I've kept the circles equal. She's been more of a friend, and again, you know, she's been the one who's brought me up with the right set of values." Rustom uses the same argument about receiving a set of values from both his parents. Comparing the two drawings, he describes his mother's as representing more of a "friend description," while his father's as more of "a teacher-subordinate sort of relationship." This is so because "A lot of things in life my father taught me, a lot of things I *learned* by watching him, so I always look up to him and try to learn, you know, from whatever I can [his emphasis]." His mother, on the other hand, is described (laughingly) as, "somebody who I can relate to in terms of her making similar mistakes that I would do."

As seen previously, Arnaz's mother played an integral part in connecting her to Zoroastrianism and eventually in establishing a meaningful and long-term personal relationship with the temple fires. For Rustom, it is rather his experience of working as a regular *boiwalla* that provides the immediate context for understanding his relationship to what he repeatedly refers to as "his" fire.

2.3.2. Rustom and "his fire"

"My faith in the fire kept on building."

Two aspects that distinguish a priestly from a non-priest perspective with regards to perception of the temple fires is the additional focus on aspects of loyalty and responsibility, which is prevalent in priestly accounts. Rustom started working part-time at his neighborhood temple during his college education. After his uncle died, his parents prompted him to conduct the ceremonies involved in funeral rituals. After a while, Rustom started performing the *boi* when some of the elderly priests had to take a medical leave.

Presently, Rustom is not working as a priest. Looking back at his tenure in the temple, despite the strenuous work schedule—especially the lack of breaks or sleep—it felt like a "good deed" and a "spiritually extremely uplifting" experience. Rustom introduces his notion of being "connected" and having a "connection" with the temple fire when describing his experiences while performing the *boi* during the first months of his tenure. In the following quote, he contrasts the feeling of performing the *boi* ritual as a priest to when he stands outside the *qibla* and worships the fires as a layperson: "You feel very, very strongly connected with the fire when you're putting the sandal-wood on the fire for the other people who are there." Besides the emotional connection functioning as a ritual mediator, tending the fires also allowed him to be in physical proximity to the fire and offer his own sandalwood in person, so to speak: "When you yourself [are] putting your own sandalwood, you also get an opportunity to touch that particular, you know, *afarganyu*, which is different … so I think that gives you, to my mind, an extremely strong connect." The possibility to remain in physical closeness with the fire seems to reinforce the connection.

Rustom continued to work part-time while still in college until he was in his early twenties. On one occasion during one of the interviews, Rustom asks himself, and answers, why he stopped practicing as a priest. He contrasts his present outlook, described as more materialistic, to his level of "innocence" in the college days but declares that he has a standing agreement with the head priest of that specific *agiary* that he will make himself available if they need him again in the future. In Rustom's mind, this promise was made not only to the priests but also to that specific fire as well: "I, in my personal capacity, have promised [and] committed to my fire that I will always be there at any point of time, you know, if need be." Rustom makes repeated references to this pledge throughout the interviews, a commitment which specifically implies serving the fire: "But even if I kind of move on in terms of, you know, say I'm retiring from the professional side of work, I would want to come and, you know … serve him." As seen here and in the answers below, Rustom typically switches

from using the masculine third-person singular pronoun to the neutral third-person singular *it*. There doesn't seem to be a clear pattern as to when and in what context he chooses one over the other.

As a servant of the fire, Rustom continues, his promise to "tend the fire" is primarily based on ritual expectations: "I *will* be there to ensure that, you know, the *boi* happens on time. So that's the biggest thing that the fire would look at; that, you know, it is tended to on time, and obviously the ceremony takes place." Performing the *boi* is not only a duty he owes as a *boiwalla* but also something the fire itself expects.

As already noted, in contrast to Arnaz, Rustom does not trace the development of a bond (or "connection") with his fire to changes in his social life: "I think when I used to pray there all alone, just hearing my voice like going in the *sanctum sanctorum*, and, you know, standing humbly in front of the fire—I think my relationship and my faith in the fire kept on building." The experience of social intimacy in the presence of, or with the fire during prayers, is here underlined. It was, then, the performance of the *boi* during the (late-night) *Ushahin geh*, with no one else present in the temple, that ignited the connection which, in turn, would develop into what can be described as a personal relationship.

The temple fire has been an integral part of Rustom's daily life since he was a child, and its role in his everyday life seems to have been growing in accordance to important events in this life. The notion of having "faith" in the fire is linked to an important characteristic of the temple fires: their ability to provide help in almost any sphere. For Rustom, the ability and will of his temple fire to help is the second constituent in the early stages of his relationship with the fire.

Rustom visited the temple right before finishing his tenth standard final exams, which turned out to be a game changer in his later career. These exams are of great importance because they more or less determine to what college or university and of which stature one is eventually admitted. In addition to studying hard, Rustom says, he "kept praying to the fire, saying: 'I would need to score a good percentage of marks so that I get into the college of my choice.'" He scored high and felt that it had been the first time the fire had granted a "really large material boon." The fire became a triggering—albeit not the most crucial—factor (see below) in deciding the exam results. Rustom concludes: "The fire heard me out, and I scored well." The psychological process, he eplains, materializes as a retrospective search for causes of important events.

Psychologically, you would want to relate it back to the fact that you went there … requested for [it], and it happened; so in your *mind*, you start believing that this particular fire is more powerful, or it's probably hearing me.

Arnaz typically emphasizes that the fires are empathic listeners. Rustom, on the other hand, often (but not exclusively) focuses on the fire as a divine helper or problem-solver. Moreover, while Arnaz links the formation of a relationship

between her and the temple fires to her mother's death, Rustom both underlines the granting of a "large" boon and his experiences of being alone with the fire in the fire chamber, to explain his heightened affinity towards this specific fire over time. In his own words, "You tend to for a period of time, because, you know, when you pray and certain boons are granted, you tend to develop a little more affinity towards that particular fire." I ask Rustom to elaborate on this concept of affinity, and he equates it to a feeling of closeness:

Affinity, as in closeness to that particular fire, so you feel that you've grown with it; so you feel that it's seen you all through, you've grown: From a child you've become a professional.

For Rustom, relating to the fire implies a "promise" for a lifelong relationship with a faithful and helpful relational partner. He goes on to remark that while the process of developing a relationship with the fire has been gradual, it is not as unilateral as it might sound. "[I]t's not been just because … I've got what I think I had asked for, because that's—that's, I think, very one-sided." Rustom is here referring to the idea, and sometimes the accusation, that people mainly visit the temple to ask for (material) boons, something which Arnaz also noted and from which she tried to distance herself. Rustom does not deny that this particular fire's ability to provide divine succor in crucial moments is a decisive feature for him to continue interacting with the fire on a regular basis. It is not, however, the only characteristic of this relationship—and the fire is not only a potential boon-giver.

"I know that there's somebody looking after me."

Rustom's parents took him to the temple at a very young age, usually during special occasions like birthdays and New Year's celebrations. In his adolescent years, he mainly visited the temple ahead of upcoming exams. The visits became more frequent when he started his religious education. These days, Rustom says, he tries to go at least once a week. He chooses the *agiary* closest to his workplace during weekdays due to his long working hours. Now, he says, he goes to the temple for a number of reasons:

I think you want to go to the *agiary* to recharge your batteries, right? … I go there because I have a lot of faith in that particular … fire, and it has helped me through my life; so I do believe that, you know, going there and praying there inspires me [and] charges me up, right? And I feel at peace mentally, [and] physically I feel that … I've got the tonic that I need to carry on.

In addition to being drawn to the temple to relate with a potent boon-giver, a visit is also likened to a battery charging station. A temple visit, it seems, provides Rustom with both cognitive and physical benefits when his mental and physical energy levels are low, and he feels the need to be re-energized or

refreshed. Rustom uses elements from the same metaphoric landscape later on in the first interview, this time when I ask him to *describe* his relationship with his fire:

My relationship with fire [pause]. It is a guiding force for me, right? It is like a battery that you want to be charged with every time you feel a bit down, every time you end up having a tough situation at hand—personally or professionally, right?

In this particular case, the metaphor of choice is more connected to an emotional state, where he suggests that the relationship makes him feel emotionally nurtured and relieved of stress, and that the fire is an integral part of his support system.

A key component in his experience of the fire as providing emotional nurturance, shared by many respondents, is the day-to-day assurance that someone is paying attention: "The relationship with [the] fire just helps me stay grounded. Spiritually I know that there's somebody looking after me, like I look after my family." In this way, Rustom makes an analogy of the fire's role as a caregiver to his own role as a father. Taken together, it is the feeling of being taken care of in a personal, loving, and emotionally nurturing relationship.

At a certain point, I ask Rustom what it would feel like if he were prevented from going to the fire temple. He answers, "I would believe that, you know, that umbilical cord I have with that fire would get broken and I would, I'm not too sure whether … that would keep me fully grounded." In this case, the metaphor he chooses points in at least two different—but not entirely so— ways. The first, describing the connection between a mother and a child, and the second, and more technical one, as a cable connecting two units. In either case, the description of this cord connecting him and the fire as umbilical is but one of many examples of Rustom's evaluation of how strongly connected he feels—a kind of connection arising from within also on the basis of the status of the fire: "When you see something so pious, when you see something so holy … naturally from within yourself you want to talk to it, you want to, you know, bow in front of it, you want to respect it and get that connect going!"

Seemingly more seldom than Arnaz, Rustom, too, discloses private information to the fire. Rustom elaborates: "It is 'my fire' that stays closest to me, and my deepest thoughts and my deepest wishes and concerns I confide in that particular fire." His choice of the word "confide" portrays the fire as a trusted receiver.

"You can't be praying in front of thin air."

Throughout the interviews, Rustom distinguishes between two kinds of connections. Doing the *boi*, for example, made him feel a strong "connect" to the fire. It also drew him closer to Ahura Mazda. "Spiritually it was very

gratifying, it made me feel very, very good. It made me feel closer to Ahura Mazda." Similar to Arnaz's account, it is Ahura Mazda's invisibility that makes the temple fire a crucial element in his attempt to connect to God. "God is omnipresent and omniscient, but you can't see him, right? It's very difficult to channelize your energies and focus yourself on something which is so very abstract." To enable one to "channelize your thoughts and to stay focused," Rustom explains, the fire "is what we would like to look at, pray at, and revere." In this discursive context, Rustom considers the fire a focusing object used to connect to what is for him, too, the final reference point.

Contrary to Arnaz, Rustom more often, and earlier on in the first interview, explicitly distinguishes between two different relationships with the fire and Ahura Mazda: "So when we go to the fire temple," Rustom starts but modifies, "or when I go to the fire temple—this relationship is a bonding between me and the fire, to *finally* connect to Ahura Mazda, right?" The end goal of interaction is, then, the temple fire—a kind of "connect" enabling Rustom to talk to god:

That communication requires you to be, you know, you can't be praying in front of thin air—it becomes very difficult, you know. You need to really have very solid power, to be able to just stand here and pray and completely not get distracted in your mind. Because you can continue praying and chanting, but … your mind would be probably going to thousands of places, you know, by now.

Rustom's interaction with the temple fire not only provides a long-term and emotionally satisfying relationship in itself but also affords Rustom a focusing point and communicative device which enables him—if thoughts are kept in check—to connect to another and more supreme being.
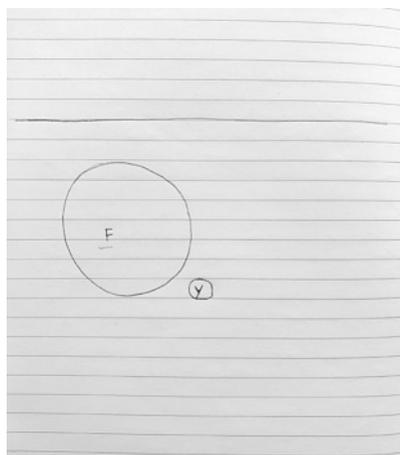
Figure 14: Rustom's representation of his relationship with his fire (1st field trip).
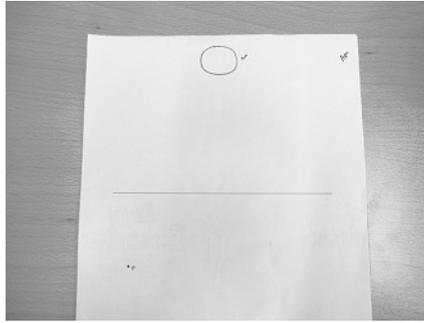
Figure 15: Rustom's representation of his relationship with Ahura Mazda (2nd field trip).

The difference in how Rustom perceives these two relationships becomes apparent in Rustom's circle drawings (figures 14 and 15).[12] Elaborating on the first drawing (i.e., him and fire), Rustom reasons: "Yeah, I decided to draw it that way because I think the fire is all-knowing, all-encompassing; and I'm too small a person to be anywhere close to, you know, the magnitude of the fire." Here, Rustom uses the size of the circles, placed on the same line, to represent differences in magnitude in the superhuman cognitive and relational abilities attributed to the fire. A year and a half later, he represents the relationship between himself and Ahura Mazda otherwise. He says: "I have represented myself as one among the millions of children of Ahura Mazda; and that is why I've just put a small and tiny dot … He is the father of everybody in the world, and I'm just one other living being." In this drawing, Rustom has both modified the size and position of the circles to underline the superhuman nature of Ahura Mazda and to indicate His universal fatherhood. Taken together, the drawings and the portraits so far suggest that Rustom distinguishes between the fires and Ahura Mazda as relational entities and the way in which he relates to them.

"I just wanted to thank him there in person."

As already noted, the way Rustom describes the interaction pattern that he has established with the fire differs to some extent from Arnaz's. Whereas Arnaz places the main emphasis on offloading, Rustom focuses more on practices related to asking for future help:

Yeah, you talk. Avestan prayers obviously are something you are expected to do to ensure that your fire listens to you. At the same time, obviously, what is in your mind, in terms of asking for a grant, for a boon, or for a wish, or for any kind of

12 Unfortunately, an abrupt end to our last interview in the second field trip meant that Rustom did not have time to make a new drawing of him and the fire. The first one (figure 14) was completed in the third and last interview during the first field trip, and the second (figure 15) at the end of the first interview during the second field trip.

help obviously has to be communicated, right? So, you would—I would tend to communicate that in my, in Gujarati language, to the fire saying, "I would need this particular help," or "I would hope this goes off well"—something of that sort.

This idea that formal prayers function as foundations to which personal requests, bequests, or thoughts are added is common among the Parsis. For Rustom, the recitation of formal prayers establishes a line of communication making the fire attend to the interaction sequence he initiates, where personal requests in the form of petitionary prayers are made. However, whether or not the fire "listens," Rustom's usual word of choice, depends on more than just a mere recitation of prayers. The worshipper's intentions and actions matter a lot—also a common belief—where one must pray "properly," indicating the correct recitation, as well as "thoughtfully" and "with the right heart." Additionally, Rustom also reasons that one needs to pray with a clear conscience: "If you pray [and] you have a clear conscience, I have seen more often than not that, you know, he comes to your help, [and] he comes to your rescue." Another layer is here added to Rustom's reasoning, where praying in the right manner not only results to a listening fire but also increases the chances of receiving help.

For Arnaz, relating to the fires is restricted to her presence in the fire temple. Rustom, on the other hand, has developed techniques enabling him to approach the fires for help off the temple's premises as well. He does so by "visualizing" two specific fires: his (own) neighborhood fire, and the Iranshah fire in Udvada. "So that wherever I am even outside of the *agiary*, and when I need some help or when I'm wanting something which I think I will need a spiritual help for, I kind of visualize that particular fire as well." The help to which Rustom refers is of a broader type and can include anything from help with tipping exam results his way to relief from stress. "So in times of need, in times when I'm too stressed and I just want to feel relaxed, I kind of just close my eyes and visualize the fire, which gives me a very calming feeling." In this case, the visualization technique provides an immediate physical and mental effect, apparently not as a result of a divine agency. As discussed in chapter 3, respondents talk about and think of fires in different ways, and utilizing fire for meditational purposes is not uncommon.

The main way the fire *responds* during interaction sequences is, for Rustom, by providing help or granting wishes—but rarely immediately. We have already seen how the fire "heard" him out when he asked for good grades on his important final exams. Another episode which he mentions a couple of times during the interviews is related to the promotion cycles at his workplace. He went to Udvada to ask the Iranshah fire for help. "So we were there as a family," Rustom starts, "and then I just took ten minutes off and, you know, also requested Pak Iranshah to help me and to position me well with my seniors." He was seeking, in his own words, "one per cent inspiration,"

emphasizing that he sees himself as the principle agent of positive change, and the fire's role is to give him that extra boost. After finishing his prayer, he made a vow to the fire: "And I promised that, you know, if I do get into it, if I do get promoted, I would come back and offer my thanks to him as well." Rustom eventually got promoted and kept his promise. On the very day he got the news about his promotion, he flew to Mumbai and told his wife to meet him at the airport. I ask him how he offered his thanks. "Ehm, apart from the sandalwood that you offer [pause], I was thankful to him in person … spoke to him to thank him." When I interrupt Rustom to ask whether he is talking about the fire when referring to "him," he replies:

Yeah, saying that, you know, "I take this opportunity to thank you for whatever help and benefit that you've given me." I know it had to be, like I said, "that one per cent inspiration had to come and that would have come from you." And I wanted to just thank him there in person, both in the offering [of] sandalwood, and also by, you know, talking.

Vows such as these are not rare in respondents' exchanges with the fires, but the fact that this vow included a promise to re-visit in person is less common. Perhaps it indicates that, for Rustom, the fire is a relational entity that wants company as well as prayers and offerings.

At the very beginning of our second interview, I asked whether he had thought about some of the things we talked about the last time we met. He pondered, he said, especially about the issue of whether he talked to the fire or not: "So I thought … it was a valid question. And probably I'm gonna be talking a lot more than what I am and not just, you know, expect him to know what I'm thinking." I probed further to bring out whether he meant that he was talking aloud:

Yeah, when I say thought, I mean in the mind. And now what I'm saying is that I will be speaking, I'll be more vocal about it. As in you know, standing in front and talking, right? So, if I'm sitting and talking to you, I'm talking to you. But when you're—normally when you're in front of the fire, you're not talking to the fire, right? Because you don't expect a response back, and you subconsciously expect that, you know, the fire—whatever you're thinking, the fire is hearing you for the same.

Above we saw how Rustom considers the fire an omniscient entity. Here he reiterates that the fire somehow has unlimited access to his thought activity. Despite this, Rustom feels that his pleas for help through non-vocalized conversational prayer must be communicated and that he has now moved from a silent mode of communication to a vocal expression of his thoughts. This indicates an adjustment to the interaction pattern between him and his temple fire.[13]

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13 At the same time, it constitutes an interesting element from a methodological point of view in

Rustom attributes certain superhuman characteristics to the fire. The feeling of being looked after is coupled with that of an all-knowing parent, in the sense that the fire is regarded as knowing one's past, present, and future actions. The following section relates such characteristics to how Rustom compares his human relationships to that with "his" fire.

"My fire doesn't expect large chunks of sandalwood from me."

In contrast to Arnaz, who describes her relationship as a type of friendship, Rustom seldom refers to the fire as a friend. Rather, upon being asked, he replies that the human relationship which most resembles his relationship with the fire is that between a parent and a child. The fire is not an ordinary parent, however:

It is probably even more than a parent-child relationship to the extent that you are always leaning and seeking onto the particular fire; so I think I would, *ehm*, I would compare it to an all-knowing parent—that somebody who knows everything about you, who's seen all your faults, who's seen all the good things you are about, and who has the ability to kind of help you in any sphere of your life as you move on.

While the emotional outcomes of a parent-child relationship as described by Rustom make the two types of relationships comparable, the fire, having unlimited cognitive abilities, such as immediate access to the worshipper's thoughts, is superior as a relational partner.

While Rustom does not typically refer to the fire as a friend, in our second and final interview during my first field trip, I ask him to compare his relationship with the fire to his human friendships. After a long pause, he starts by contrasting two types of friend: "One who stands by you by all means, and then you have your friends who stand by you, but only in good times and not necessarily when chips are down for you." Fire and the first category "would go hand in hand," he reasons. Rustom here draws on the degree and availability of social support to contrast bad and good friends (e.g., the fire) respectively. However, there are limits to what the fire can provide:

And surely if you have a good friend who is well to do, then if it's a financial issue [that you are having], he could probably look at helping you out, which maybe obviously a fire cannot do. But at the same time, I think, more than the financial issue, which I think is fairly well overcome, there are so many *other* personal issues that people have in their lives … where a friend may not be able to add too much more value, you know, beyond giving you a few words of advice.

that Rustom seemingly modifies his behavior when relating to the fire as a result of questions posed by myself during the first interview (see chapter 3 for a discussion).

Unlike an affluent friend, the fire cannot help to overcome financial problems. This is in line with the above quote, where Rustom emphasizes that he sees himself as the main agent in his own fortunes. There is, however, a distinction, in that at a certain point human peers can only provide informational support, while the fires are believed to provide the crucial emotional support needed.

Rustom extends the comparison by using the quantity of sandalwood to further elaborate on the difference between the fire as a relational entity and his human friends: "I feel my fire doesn't expect large chunks of sandalwood from me; just sincerely giving one small piece is good enough for the fire. That may be different from a friend." Here, Rustom turns his attention to the different expectations of his relational partners. His human friends might be expecting more from the relationship, at least in sequences of exchange. However, this is only so in the context of sandalwood, because the fire does have expectations—only of a different kind:

This fire doesn't talk back, and it probably expects you to, you know, come more often to meet him, right? … I mean I feel that I'm unable to take out enough time to go and meet the fire as much as maybe it expects me to come and meet, right? But you tend to take out time for your friends because you're going out and you're catching up, socializing or something or the other … which you feel is more important than sometimes going to the fire temple. So yeah, I think to that extent, fire is so much generous; even if you kind of don't meet it for a few weeks, it's not as if, you know, it'll stop considering you as one of its chosen or blessed children. So, there's the difference.

For Rustom, the amount of time one shares with the fire is taken to signify something. Comparing his human friends to the fire in the context of relational expectations, the fire is thought not only to expect visits but also more often than Rustom is able to pay. In this case, his human friendships are prioritized at the expense of temple visits. At the end of the day, however, this is not a major problem for Rustom, as he perceives the fire as generously forgiving. It is also worth noticing how he is hesitant to be conclusive, especially when he talks about the fire, for example what it might expect ("probably expects," "maybe it expects"). Of several possible interpretations of this pattern, one is that the comparison itself, prompted by the somewhat peculiar interests of the interviewer, is not necessarily something he has considered before. While the level of material expenditure is not relevant, one similarity in the two relationships is that in both Rustom is "expected to be honest and humble, like in front of the fire, to other human beings as well."

2.4. Sarosh[14]

> It may be very difficult for a non-priest or for any other person to even comprehend what I'm saying, and probably you think that I'm mad. But it's only when you enter His chamber and you actually handle Him that you realize, "Ok, today it's this day," you know? So that comes through years and years and years of interaction with the Fire (Sarosh, 2013).

2.4.1. Personal background

Sarosh is one of the younger head priests in the community. In addition to having a university degree, he is an accountant by profession. Recollection of his childhood, at least before the early adolescence years, was restricted to memories of "ritual" temple visits reserved for occasions like birthdays and New Year's celebrations and his family, he remembers, "were not extremely religious." A gap in the family priesthood lineage and consequent "family pressure" was one of the reasons for his somewhat forced choice to opt for priesthood.

Sarosh subsequently received informal training at home from a neighborhood priest. Once he entered college, he says, "I got more serious, I began to study religion." That study was Khshnoomism. He describes his encounters with Khshnoom teachings as a turning point in his religious career. His own narration of what he terms a "radical experience," and the subsequent development, is worthy of special attention:

Then when I saw this, and when I experienced it, it was a very radical experience in the sense that it totally opened your eyes that "Oh My God! All these years, what have I been doing?" First there was *fear* that I have been doing something which is spiritually wrong; even though I may not know it—but, like they say, ignorance is no excuse. You go to court and, you know, you are accused of something and say, "I didn't know it was wrong." The judge says, "Yeah, but that's the law and even if you don't know it, you have to suffer the penalty for it" … The second one was the *exhilaration*

14 In an email exchange taking place between September 1 and 2, 2015, Sarosh responded to a draft of the portrait he had received. Sarosh writes: "I am comfortable with using a fictitious name for the simple reason that there are references in my interview to my wife, and she should not feel that I have compromised on her privacy … You can keep whatever paragraphs you want." He also requested that I capitalize the *F* in (temple) fires, something I agreed to do in all quotes as it seemed very important to him.

that "Oh Yes! Now I know why I am putting these eight flowers, now I know why I am doing this ceremony." And then third was the *desire* that "Why should I alone know it? Why should I not teach others, because I don't want somebody else to go through the pain and commit the sins which I have committed, in doing this in coming across this journey [my emphases]."

In the narration of his development, Sarosh sketches a three-step process, starting with fear and ending with desire, spurring him to start giving talks. This strategy did not go according to plan in its initial stages, and it was his reaction to the "ignorance" of other priests that made him realize that he wanted to become a full-time priest so that he could "show the world that we can do honest priesthood without resorting to any shortcuts [and] malpractices."

Sarosh spends a considerable amount of time during our interview to describe such malpractices. It is mainly the lack of education, he claims, that leads priests nowadays to focus on what he calls the "mechanics" instead of the "spiritualities" of priesthood. "You can be a perfect priest," he states, "you can know all the prayers by heart, you can know all the rituals, and still you can be a totally useless priest because you're doing it in a repetitive, monotonous, [and] non-application-of-mind fashion." A good priest is not so much determined by his performance as by the degree of mental and devotional energy one puts into the work.

One part of this "spirituality" of priesthood is the personal rapport one should, in Sarosh's opinion, establish with the temple fire of one's choice—both as a priest *and* as a layperson. Establishing such a relationship creates certain obligations which can conflict with expectations from his family members—especially his children.

As the head priest, administering the temple affairs *and* functioning as the main *boiwalla*, Sarosh works long hours in the temple. When he makes references to his family life during the long interview, it is typically in the context of the colliding worlds of priesthood and family expectations. Because of his work, he reasons, he has been "neglecting" his duty as the family patron: "Because my children couldn't see me, I couldn't take them out, I couldn't take out my wife anywhere." The lack of time coupled with the physical exhaustion after returning from the temple late in the evening makes his family life a somewhat extra burden to cope with.

School vacations are one period when this pressure becomes more than difficult to handle. "My children", he says at a certain point, "will just keep on eating my head: 'Where are we going for this vacation?' And you know, then I would have to say: 'I'm sorry, but I can't take you because I have to be here.'" Below we will see how Sarosh turns to the fire to voice his distress on these and related matters.

Sarosh concludes that personally he is in a fortunate situation because his job duties coincide with the road to "salvation," despite his overall negative

view on the priesthood as practiced in the present-day community. The following section lays out Sarosh's bond to "his fire," which he considers a companion on his way to salvation (or *frashogard*). The idea of the final renovation and the coming of a savior (Av. *Saoshyant*), fundamental to Khshnoom teachings, provides Sarosh with a framework to describe and make sense of his long-term personal relationship with his fire.

2.4.2. Sarosh and "his fire"

"The formative years"

The function of temple fires in the doctrinal (and eschatological) scheme of the Khshnoom movement is of central importance to Sarosh, and he spends a considerable amount of time elaborating and presenting it to me during our long interview. Partly influenced by theosophical ideas, the Khshnoom perspective is that the fire temples attract, receive, and process, "like giant magnets," a supernatural energy called *Asere Roshni* (literally, "endless light," MP.) or "benevolent currents." In this scheme, the main function of the fires is to transmit such currents to worshippers. At one point during the interview, he finds and pen and paper and starts to draw. "Now this spiritual *Asere Roshni* is falling everywhere, how do you catch it? When the devotee comes and bows down over here [Sarosh draws], some part of that goes to him. This is the actual functioning of the fire temple." The consecration process is one which arouses fire "energies" dormant in physical objects and trapped in physical fires. The consecrated fire is, thus, divinity released, not created: "When it is released," Sarosh states, "we are worshipping that, because that has the ability to link you from here right up to there"; and, he points out, "more important than that, every human develops a personal relationship with the Fire."

In "the formative years," Sarosh states, "I had a very strong relationship with the Fire temple where I started practicing." He blames his own immaturity when explaining why he left the temple in an "unhappy" fashion. Reflecting on how this departure had a subsequent effect on his relationship with that particular fire, he draws on other priests' lack of attention. "Even if I go back today, that empathy is not there. I cannot feel it because I feel that, you know, the Fire could have been served much better." The feeling of empathy is, in other words, one of several components materializing as a result of a bonding between the worshipper and a temple fire. For Sarosh, the lack of such empathy, or belongingness, makes the relationship lose its original meaning. More so than internal ones, absence of such a sentiment comes as a consequence of external factors, particularly in that practicing priests show less attention toward the fire.

The main characteristics of Sarosh's personal relationship with his fire have, according to him, developed as the outcome of years of interaction on a

daily basis, culminating in a shared level of understanding: "Today, after serving this Fire for ten years, I can talk to the Fire, and I can understand his distress, and I can understand what he's feeling today."

"I can understand his distress."

It is repeated interaction in performing the *boi* that helps Sarosh interact with the fire on a daily basis, which enables him to gain access to the sentient nature of this particular fire. Notions of relationships, as argued in chapter 1, are formed on the basis of frequent interaction sequences. One consequence of repeated interactions is the formation of distinct interaction patterns:

It may be very difficult for a non-priest or for any other person to even comprehend what I'm saying, and probably you think that I'm mad. But it's only when you enter His chamber and you actually handle Him that you realize, "Ok, today it's this day," you know? So that comes through years and years and years of interaction with the Fire.

To Sarosh, the extra dimension in his personal relationship with the fire vis-à-vis a non-priest is the ability to gain access to the feelings and moods of the fire. This advantage, he reasons, is enabled both by the frequent interaction and the physical (and emotional) proximity to the fire which his occupation offers him.

Moreover, interaction with the fires typically does not bring any communicative obstacles. To illustrate his point, he uses a metaphor characteristic of the Khshnoom perspective. When humans interact, Sarosh says, they can experience trouble whilst trying to connect to each other, "attuning, you know, it's like the radio. You get static, static, static, static and then *phhh*—and then suddenly you hit that station." He furthermore relates this to the social world of humans: "So in life there's a lot of static because you connect with all kinds of people, most of them are static … but the relationship with the Fire is that one 'bang' station, where there is no static." Sarosh expands the metaphor to contrast his relationship with the fire (i.e., non-static and ideal) to human relationships (i.e., static and non-ideal).

Sarosh goes on to state how the relationship to his fire is subject to varying degrees of satisfaction. "That there are good days and bad days," he hastens to add, "from my side obviously, not from his side … in the sense that the Fire will never have a bad day with me because it is not imperfect, I am imperfect." Sarosh seems to navigate between two different discursive levels when trying to describe his perception of this relational entity: An emotional level, where the fire is attributed with sentience (in this specific case, the capacity to be distressed), and an idealized level, where the fire is unable to feel such emotions due to its "perfect" status. One possible interpretation is that these occurrences relate to two ways of perceiving the fire. One is where Sarosh

speaks as an upholder of the doctrinal version about the perfect nature of divine beings, and the other a more personal level, which stems from his day-to-day interaction with the fire.

As described above, Sarosh feels guilty when he is unable to take his children on vacation due to his busy work schedule. He recollects putting the same worries forward to the fire: "So at those points, I would put my head down and ask: 'Why are you not sending somebody … a reliever, so that maybe for five days I can take my kids out?'" The problem persisted, and his pleas did not lead to a solution.

Sarosh is, at the time of the interview, finding it hard to recruit priests to work with him. He argues that this has to do with his personality as a "strict disciplinarian" and the way he expects that new priests share the same emotional commitment, or the "devotion or longing" for the fire. Sarosh uses his personal feelings in terms of devotion toward the fire as the benchmark for hiring a new priest—a kind of devotion which he likens to a frenzy: "I understand that not everybody is as mad as me, but I try to instill some of that madness, so that, you know, I feel a person should work with his heart—otherwise not work at all." Thus, the profession requires "madness," hard work, and emotional commitment.

Sarosh appeals to the priests working for him to develop their own personal rapport with the fires, developing their own unique interaction pattern along the way: "I always ask them to develop their own relationship with the Fire because what I feel for the Fire, and what the Fire may be conveying to me, may be something very different than what it may be conveying to him." In other words, the fire is capable of responding in different ways to different people. Distinct interaction patterns materialize with different relational partners, and the relationships are consequently unique to each individual.

The communicative process between him and the fire is markedly two-way from Sarosh's perspective: "One is our personal level, and the second is the level where you … [are] interceding for the *behdin*." The following paragraphs present Sarosh's reflections and thoughts about his role as a mediator in the interaction between devotees and the temple fire.

"There is no life without a Fire."

According to Sarosh, non-priests both can and should develop a personal rapport with the fires. The fire "not only has a relationship with the whole community, but [also with] every person who comes to Him." Whether or not such relationships actually materialize depend on two factors: on laypeople's ability to commit emotionally to the fires and on the quality of the priest: "So that again depends on the devotees, the intensity of the devotees' feelings, and

the intensity of the priest who is serving Him also." The sense of fervor described in this quote is typical of Sarosh.

Towards the end of the interview, I ask Sarosh whether a salient distinction is that between a "social" and a "ritual" relationship with the fire. He adopts the distinction and connects it to a tripartite relation: "The ritual relationship is very separate, because that is, you know, as the guardian of the Fire you are protecting the Fire, you're offering the *boi* and all that—that is a very ritual relationship." The protection of the fire and the offering of the *boi* are ritual commitments to the fire *and* the community. "And at the same time," he continues, "you have a personal relationship with the Fire which is very different, which is like—you may call it social." The former, he says, is the "community role" and the latter the "personal role."

In this communal relationship, the fire works actively, together with the priest, to realize the final restoration for all its members. "And when you go inside also, that is the same feeling which you share with the Fire. That both of us are working, not only for my individual salvation but also for the salvation of all those people who we are serving." While Sarosh perceives himself and the fire as co-workers to bring forth this ideal situation, he also emphasizes how the priest should not come in the way of the personal mode between a *behdin* and the fire. The priest is, in Sarosh's view, not a required mediator in the devotee–fire relationship but could rather fulfill the role as a guide or mentor:

We can guide the *behdin*, definitely. We can make him understand how he should approach [the Fire], or we can maybe give him some prayers, you know, and counsel him in some way. But the direct relationship will always be between the Fire and the *behdin*. You cannot stand in between that … that's very important because then you are taking on a sort of semi-divine role, which is not correct.

Thus, the personal relationship depends on some backing or grounding in the community of believers. The role as a mediator on behalf of the community puts the priest in a special position compared to the layperson vis-à-vis the fire—a position of both privilege and burden:

I guess in that sense you are more privileged than a *behdin* because you are actually able to handle the Fire, and at the same time it puts a great responsibility on you which a *behdin* doesn't have, you know? So yeah, there is a prestige and there is a privilege, but that comes with a terrible burden also.

Similar to Rustom, and in line with a characteristic priestly perspective, Sarosh here underlines the great responsibility which comes with tending the fires. It is particularly in connection with the material part of the relationship between worshippers and fires that priests act as intercessors. The offering of wood to the fire, in the form of sandalwood sticks (PGuj. *sukhar*), is (also) interpreted as a communicative act. Sarosh explains:

Then the talk changes to the different *boi*s, because for each *boi* there may be some person who has come with a *machi*, right? So that person may come and say, "Oh, *Dasturji*, today is my son's birthday, so we are having this *machi*," or "We have passed through some difficulty and we are offering this as a thanksgiving!" So that is the personal dialogue which you have with the Fire, that this is the *machi* we are offering for this person.

A *machi*, it seems, materializes the communicative intention of the non-priest. In other words, in addition to sharing his own family problems with the fire, Sarosh also perceives the dialogue between him and the fire as one where he acts as a medium upon which the interaction with the fire and laypeople is built. The intentions of non-priests, on the other hand, are typically short-term:

So, this is the dichotomy that the devotee's desire is for instantaneous or propitious gain: "I want a Ferrari tomorrow"; whereas the *Padshah*'s desire is that you must attain salvation, so whatever He is giving is from that long-term perspective. In that long-term perspective, sometimes He may give something which [in the] short term may be of great disadvantage to us.

What we see here is the juxtaposition of a human short-term wish with the fire's long-term desire, as well as the juxtaposition of human actions and thoughts with the fires' own "thoughts" or inner workings. The desires of humans and fires are here treated in the same sentence and the same realm of conceptualization. Thus, they are perceived as different not in kind but rather in content.

The Fire is longing for a *machi*, or a *boi*, or a *sukhar* … "[U]nless you give it to me, how will you achieve salvation?" And "I am sitting here waiting to help you achieve salvation." So that longing is in that different sense, it's not out of the selfish sense that "Somebody give me fire so that I can blaze well."

In this quote, Sarosh personifies the fire, implicitly referring to the *Atash Niyaesh*, while clarifying that a fire's yearning for offerings of wood derives not from egoistic needs and for superficial reasons but from a wish to continue guiding the entire community on the path of salvation.

Upon being asked, Sarosh touches upon how his relationship with the fire differs from important interhuman relationships: "The difference is that the center point of your life is the Fire. There is no life without a Fire. I can maybe live without a couple of friends—or maybe even if my family is torn apart— but to live without the Fire would be very difficult; so in that sense, it is in a preeminent position." Other respondents, like Arnaz, endorse the same perception that this relationship with the temple fire is of prime importance; but Sarosh goes a bit further in how important he believes his priestly and personal commitments toward the fire are. He illustrates his point with a story about a disagreement between him and his wife, leading to what he describes as one of the most difficult days in his life. The long hours in the fire temple and

health issues due to the hard work schedule frustrated his wife. "So one day," he says, "there was a showdown, and she said: 'What do you want to do? Either you choose this, or you choose this.' So I said: 'The answer is very simple: I'll have to choose the Fire.'" He continues:

Because you are a good girl, you are a beautiful girl, you'll easily find somebody else; but the Fire won't be able to find somebody else. You can live five days without me, [but] the Fire cannot. Even if one *gah* goes, it's all over. So if you are asking me, even though it kills me in my heart, I will have to leave you.

Sarosh concludes that, upon choosing between two kinds of relationships, he would have to choose his fire. Such a conclusion seems to be based not on a comparison between two relationships as such but rather on how the two relational entities have qualitatively different needs. His wife, a human peer, can survive on her own; the fire, on the other hand, depends on him for its mere survival. This is but one example in the material that underlines to what extent some priests experience their duty and obligation to tend the fire(s) as a burden as well as a privilege. In Sarosh's view, the (perceived) lack of competent and reliable priests makes this situation even harder to cope with. This powerful feeling of discouragement reflecting on his present life situation, with so many needs to meet, is typical of Sarosh's account of his everyday life.

"All those technicalities disappear."

Similar to Rustom, Sarosh sometimes distinguishes between his relationships with his fire and with Ahura Mazda respectively. While he interacts with his fire on a daily basis, he has "never seen God." That does not imply, however, that God is detached from the world:

You feel Him when you're, you know, stuck writing something. And you are stuck, and the words just won't come. And then you will open one book and you will open the page and bam! There's the answer! That is God, you know … you are looking at tomorrow's prayer schedule and you are saying: "Oh my God, there are so many ceremonies [and] there are no priests available; what am I going to do?" And then suddenly somebody calls and says, "Uncle, I can come for prayers tomorrow" … that is God.

For Sarosh, God is to be found in the small "miracles" and the struggles of everyday life. It is no surprise that the two examples he gives are from priesthood and writing, two fundamental occupations of his.

At one point during the interview, Sarosh likens the *boi* ritual to a "divine exchange" happening between the "devotee and the God" through the fire. The role of the fire in the relationship between a worshipper and Ahura Mazda is that of a guide, analogous to an indispensable GPS in the midst of the chaotic Mumbai traffic: "You may have all the roads in Bombay, but if you don't know

where to go or how to reach there, you're never going to reach there, so the *Atash* is nothing but that divine guide, the GPS, which will lead us to God." Much like Arnaz, Rustom, and Feroza, Sarosh stresses the difference in (physical) nature of the temple fires as opposed to Ahura Mazda. The fire, he states, is "the only physically visible thing for us, which connects us to the divine." Relating to the fire is like "holding hands with God. I think that's the easiest way I can put it: You're holding hands with God." In other words, one kind of relationship leads to another. "It's very difficult," he says, "to separate Fire and God." He continues: "For a lot of Parsis, that is God, what they see blazing on the *afarganyu*, right? For those who are more educated, we feel that ok, this is the agency through which we will reach God." In this case, Sarosh uses—somewhat derogatorily—the religious educational level to contrast, seemingly, between priests and non-priests. The doctrinal distinction and separation of the two entities is above all a technical matter:

But what I feel is when you bow your head down, all those technicalities disappear, and in a sense, it is one stream only—it's just one stream. At the top is Ahura Mazda, there's Fire, and that is the road. So it's not that today am I talking to God or am I talking to Ahura Mazda or am I talking to Fire; it's not that way—it's just a stream of consciousness.

The distinction between the fire and God is dissolved and made insignificant once one interacts with the fire.

2.5. Feroza[15]

> Why is it that whenever we go to an agiary or a fire temple, we are told to bow down before the fire and very few of us really visit the water or the well? I mean I said, "Let the world go to the fire, I'm happy with water." So I kept worshipping that, and I could never vibe with the fire (Feroza, first interview, 2012).

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15 In an email exchange on May 16th, 2015, Feroza responded to a draft of the portrait which she had received. Like Rustom, Feroza did not suggest that any corrections or modifications be made but writes conclusively: "Please keep my story as part of your study. I would be so happy if someone learns from it. There is no need to change anything—it is just perfect."

2.5.1. Personal background

"They never forced me into praying," Feroza says when she describes the religious influence her parents had on her during her childhood. The few childhood memories she recollects, or deems relevant enough to recount, are mostly connected to her mother's health issues and their impact on her social as well as her religious life.

In general, Feroza's relationship with her mother, similarly to Arnaz—but to an even greater extent—is a key theme throughout the interviews. Praying, for example, was not something for which she made time when she was a teenager: "I didn't know my basic prayers till I took my tenth standard because I never really felt the need to pray." The situation changed when her mother started suffering from health issues, and the visits to the temple became more frequent: "So every time my mother had to go in for her blood tests, and the series of reports had to come, I used to go to the *agiary*." Under these specific circumstances, temple visits became a kind of coping method for Feroza. As we will see later, a particular temple visit had a significant positive effect on her personal health issues.

Arnaz describes her mother's death as a turning point, especially in how she got more involved in religion. Feroza similarly explains how her mother's failing health made her do the same: "I said, 'I have to do something in life, I have to really, really achieve something.' So I took to two things: I took to my studies, and I took to God. So that was when my prayer book came to my help." Prayers are, as we will see, important for Feroza in her daily life, which also includes housework and religious studies.

Like Arnaz, Feroza often spends her spare time on the religious study of Zoroastrianism, attending religious classes and lectures herself. However, whereas Rustom, Arnaz, and Sarosh all highlight non-affiliation with other religions as an important part of their Zoroastrian identity, Feroza has a different take on the issue: "Yes … because I'm a Zoroastrian, that affinity to Zoroastrianism is there. But if you tell me that this is a flower and there is God in it, I'll embrace it most willingly. To me it matters little [whether it is] a Christian god or a Hindu god; I have no problems." Despite her attraction to Zoroastrianism, her concept of God transcends both religious and ethnic boundaries. Whereas Arnaz chooses not to go to weddings of family members who marry non-Parsis, Feroza has a different view on the matter. "I hate my husband," she exclaims, "when he tells the children, 'You have to get a Parsi spouse.' No, don't do that; a human being is a human being! It matters little [whether it is a] Parsi or non-Parsi." In this case, Zoroastrian humanism triumphs over ethnicity.

At one point, Feroza elaborates on what she sees as a "trend towards spirituality" in the Parsi community, especially among the younger gener-ation. She illustrates the point by providing an example from the Bhikha

Behram Well, where she has noticed that more and more youngsters are going to pray. The development she has identified coincides with her own. "Like I feel a change coming in me," she explains, "more and more I'm getting spiritually inclined." The problem is that this spiritual inclination has not had a positive impact on her family life, especially with regards to her relationship with her husband.

Feroza typically, in a way similar—but not identical—to Sarosh, describes a tension between the domestic and the religious sphere. It is mainly her relationships with her immediate family members that she brings up during the interviews, and two elements are conspicuous: her diametrically different perceptions of her parents, and her difficulty relating to men. It quickly becomes clear that Feroza, like Arnaz, has a somewhat troubled relationship with her father.

It was her mother's poor health condition that spurred Feroza to go the fire temple to pray to begin with. The reason for leaving the house was not unexpected: "I wasn't much of a prayer person at home," Feroza explains, "I used to go to the *agiary* because my home environment was very bad. I've only seen my parents quarrelling *all* the time … and after every quarrel my mommy has spoiled her health." It was this troubled home environment that generated her negative feelings toward her father. On that note, Feroza blames both herself and her father for the poor relationship: "The major, major thing I've done wrong in my life, and I don't want to correct myself, is towards my dad." This self-critical, yet somehow stubborn, attitude is typical of Feroza, as we will see later.

It is the lack of affection from her father that troubles Feroza when she looks back on her childhood. When her mother's health was worsening, she felt disoriented, "because I've never really got the affection, the love, which I would have wanted from my dad." Despite giving her father credit for trying, something was missing—the emotional attachment: "He wanted the best for his children. He really slogged, and he really made us *very* comfortable. But somewhere I feel he has missed out on the love and affection bit."

Today, she concludes, "no matter how much he's trying, somewhere I feel I cannot give back to him. I just cannot. And I don't know how people can really love their father, I don't know." The attitude Feroza expresses here is not exclusive to her father but extends to other men as well. At one point, she ponders why her own daughter can be so affectionate toward her father—her own husband, that is. She concludes: "I can never relate, basically, with males; I don't know why I am more comfortable with women." In her view, this inability is one reason why she has taken to a female deity, finding it hard to relate to a male one.

One noticeable thing about Feroza is the level of anxiety she displays during the interviews, of which she is painfully aware. Despite being happy, having a husband and children she describes as wonderful, she is "all the time edgy and worried" about her mother. Several times during both interviews she discloses

that she is bothered by the fact that her relationship with her mother has grown so intense that it has become a source of discomfort in itself: "I just go berserk the minute I hear she's not well or anything. My mouth becomes dry, I feel so horrible." Even though Feroza declares her family life is rewarding, it is her mother who holds the prime position. When she is sick, everyone else has to make way:

So, I just leave my husband, I leave my children, I leave my work, I leave my prayers, I leave everything, and I'm just with my mother. I am so unfair at times with my people, but they have put up with me; like a rock my husband has supported me.

Whereas Arnaz started frequenting the temple fires after her mother died, Feroza visits the temple to cope with her mother's illness. However, the main thing that distinguishes Feroza from Arnaz and the other Parsi individuals portrayed in this chapter is that she does not establish a personal relationship with one or some of consecrated temple fires. That kind of relationship is reserved for another divine figure, also connected to the temple: the water deity.

2.5.2. Feroza and the water deity

An attachment (or "bond," "relation," or "connect/ion"—all frequently used in respondents' narratives) to one or a few individual fires is common in the material. Less common but still relevant is how a few respondents report that they also feel a special affinity toward one specific well. Feroza variedly refers to the well as the "Goddess," "celestial mother," "angel," and Ava Yazad. To elucidate the connection between the physical well and a (female) deity, Feroza says: "I visualize that there's a goddess, a deity who presides in the water." The fact that the deity is "supposedly residing in the waters" is also the reason why Feroza typically goes to the temple to visit the well; however, interaction with the divinity is not restricted to the temple. "And I just shut my eyes and I pray that I'm praying to this goddess, and it's this goddess who is with me." In contrast to fire, which is rarely—if ever—attributed with physical anthropomorphic features, this divinity is, to Feroza, human-like (and somewhat reminiscent of how a Hindu goddess in her human form *could* be portrayed): "It's a very physical personality," she says, "tall lady, fair golden hair, [with] bangles, [and a] *sari*. For me, that is Ava Yazad."

"Let the world go to the fire."

Early on in the first interview, Feroza admits that she was, at first, reluctant to meet me after learning from a former respondent what I was interested in when meeting Parsis for interviews: "I was never fond of the fire," she concludes, "that's why when NN told me that 'You should speak to him,' I said:

'I can't because I have never ever been able to relate to the fire, because right from the beginning I have been very attached to the waters.'" Feroza contrasts the inability to "relate" to the fire to the feeling of being "attached" to the water. "Let the world go to the fire," she exclaims at one point, "I'm happy with water," an exclamation stemming from her opinion that the temple fires attract more attention than the wells do.

Feroza traces the starting point of her attachment to the water deity to an instance when her deceased grandmother appeared to her in a series of dreams: "Water also came quite late in life, because after I lost my grandmother, my mommy's mother, she came in my dream thrice … and she told me that 'You have to pray the *Ardavisur Niyaesh.*'" Both her mother and Feroza herself are spiritually inclined to have what they consider to be prophetic dreams. Feroza believes that her dreams provide important information not only about upcoming and often dramatic events but also about everyday decisions. She recollects another episode when the family decided to buy a wardrobe: "That was that particular night when the same goddess came to me. And she said: 'Don't get the wardrobe done here, I'm staying over here.' And I got up with a start and I said: 'What was this I saw, some angel [over] here?'" The wardrobe was eventually moved, and the original spot is now dedicated to the water deity:

I've located that area only for Ava Ardavisur; you'll not find it in a Parsi household, but I've done it. Because now this is something I've seen, it's so exclusive to me—I've seen my angel there; so I do believe in a goddess. I know you'll say it's not there in our religion, I know it's not there—but yes, I do.

Here, Feroza considers her approach to Zoroastrianism as contrary to what she believes is the majority's (or the researchers') position on the matter. The way she perceives her relationship with the temple fires is also contrary to the majority's position: Unlike the water deity, the presence of the fire stirs up negative, or at best mixed, emotions:

Sometimes, very honestly, I feel a little belittled because I feel that I'm so stuck up in my thinking that I can't relate to fire anymore—very rigid in my thinking. I need to be more open. Sometimes I feel very inferior in front of the fire, that I have not been able to give my very best to the fire.

Whether the choice of word "anymore" is intentional or not, it indicates that Feroza once had positive feelings toward the fire. Moreover, the feeling of belittlement in this context seems to imply feeling unimportant in the gaze of the fire. What is noteworthy in the present discussion is that Feroza takes a self-critical stance when reviewing these feelings, especially her lack of commitment to the fires. She blames herself, not the fire, for lacking the "right" or "appropriate" feelings in her interaction. She experiences her feeling of not giving the fire her best as guilt:

The fire is such a benign and such a holy thing that when you suddenly go with a bad frame of mind or something like that, then you suddenly see it; you can feel it actually welcoming you. "Oh, what have I done for the fire? Nothing!" So [I feel] that kind of guilt.

Again, in a self-critical way, she points to her own lack of purpose and feeling of inadequacy toward an entity which kindly welcomes her. It is her somewhat stubborn nature that prevents a stronger commitment. This is not just Feroza's way of coming to terms with her emotions and how they stand against her interpretation of the majority's perspective; it also has to do with her interhuman relations, and particularly her inability to relate to men.

"The son is being glorified and this daughter has no status."

Arnaz and Rustom do not attach the same significance to temple wells as they do to the temple fires. Rustom reasons that he is probably unable to have an equally strong "connect" to the water because in his childhood he was taken to the fire temple and groomed to perceive the fire as being at a higher level. On the contrary, Feroza uses the same argument to explain *why* she spends more time at the well. "Why," she asks somewhat rhetorically, "is it that whenever we go to an *agiary* or a fire temple, we are told to bow down before the fire, and very few of us really visit the water, or the well?" The lack of attention, so to speak, is then interpreted in the context of unfair kinship relations: "That's what I always feel, that everyone goes to, you know, what I mean to say is why does everyone go to the son, and at the same time why don't they go to the daughter as well? The son is being glorified and this daughter has no status." Her voice trembles as she continues: "You go to Udvada, you all the time talk of the fire, fire, fire, and that poor well has no standing." As these quotes show, the water is by extension attributed with its own sentience, and Feroza expresses a sense of sympathy for the water, perhaps of a motherly kind. She contrasts her emotional connection to the fire to the water by pointing out that the "poor" water is somewhat neglected by the majority of the Parsis. The specific use of this kinship relation, along with the choice of words in the comparison, makes her point somewhat more powerful. It is the contrast between a "glorified" and popular son and the unpopular daughter with no "status" and standing.

Feroza uses her reluctance to recite the prayer devoted to fire as a way to contrast her commitment towards fire and water respectively. "People used to tell me," she states, "if you don't pray the *Atash Niyaesh*, you're not worshipping the fire. So, I don't believe in doing something I can't relate to." Reciting any given *Niyaesh* prayer is interpreted by Feroza as a sign of commitment to the entity to which it is devoted and not just a blind adherence to the standard course of action in the temple. On the matter, her husband also

points out to her the supreme theological role of the fire in relation to Ahura Mazda. "He prays a lot," Feroza says, "and he always tells me: 'You don't pray the *Atash Niyaesh*, which is very wrong because *Atash* is supposed to be the son of God.'" Taken together, what Feroza in a sense expresses here is the resistance to bow to peer pressure and normative expectations; a kind of resistance which is not only expressed by the fact that most people, in her opinion, devote most of their time to the fire when in the temple, but also by the reluctance to recite the prayer dedicated to the fire. Feroza illustrates her view with an example from her day-to-day life:

You know, in the course of the day, I'll say *Ardavisur Niyaesh* three times, but I will not say the *Atash Niyaesh:* "Now, this is so wrong, you're praying to the waters three times in the day, you strike a balance; pray to the water once and fire once." But I won't do that.

The expectation, personified through her representation of her husband's voice, is to strike a balance between two divine beings and not favor one at the expense of the other; or, closer to her own wording, to treat the son and the daughter on an equal basis.

At the start of the second interview, Feroza tells me that she had visited the temple before meeting me, and "could have easily come ten minutes earlier and prayed *Atash Niyaesh* if I wanted to." But, she concludes, "I didn't want to, so this is something which is wrong—so the guilt is definitely there. But I don't want to improve; I don't know why." It seems as if this guilt that Feroza experiences is born of the feeling of inadequacy in terms of not devoting enough attention to the fire, at least from her husband's perspective, who wants her to conform to his idea of proper worship. I ask Feroza to elaborate on why this guilt arises in the first place. She responds:

Guilt is because I feel that we Parsis are known to be fire-worshippers, and … there is a prayer devoted to fire, *Atash Niyaesh*; and I don't pray it. So I do feel guilty, that being a Parsi I don't pray to the fire, and all that. So that's the kind of guilt I have: I should be doing this.

The guilt Feroza expresses seems partly self-imposed and partly socially imposed, due to her opposition to majority beliefs, or even (scholarly) outsider expectations, and the belief system of the religion.

Finally, Feroza reluctantly admits that she rarely says the *Atash Niyaesh* prayer for yet another reason. "No," she states, "I rarely recite the *Atash Niyaesh.*" At this point, she takes a longer break, seemingly considering whether or not to go ahead with her explication. "Very honestly, I'm a little superstitious, [and] every time I have recited the *Atash Niyaesh*, something not so pleasant has happened." However, she refuses to elaborate on the nature of such happenings.

The difference in the frequency of praying the *Niyaesh*s devoted to fire and water respectively also marks a kind of staunchness in Feroza's relationship

with the temple well contra the temple fire: "I mean my loyalty is still to the water, the fire is very much there [in the temple]. Like just now when I was praying, I was sitting opposite the fire and praying. But I didn't pray the *Atash Niyaesh*, I prayed my water prayer." As I did not probe further into this specific topic, it is difficult to decipher whether or not Feroza did this to deliberately oppose the general rule of praying individual *Niyaesh*s exclusively in front of the element to which they are devoted, a regulation associated with purity and keeping the elements apart also on a symbolic level. The somewhat negative interpretation that she does this exactly to make a point is made plausible by a number of factors, such as the fact that she is so reluctant to bow to peer pressure and normative expectations, her negative feelings toward the fire, and the choice of the word "loyalty."

Regardless, Feroza associates her reluctance to pray the prayer devoted to fire to a question of loyalty toward another being (getting less attention), not giving in to peer pressure, and prior negative prayer experiences. Feroza also makes sandalwood relevant for the present discussion of relational loyalty. She stresses several times that she does willingly give sandalwood: "I carry the incense with me, I light the *diva*, and I put sugar [to the water deity], and I of course give the sandalwood to the fire." As a part of her temple routine, Feroza offers material gifts both to the fire and the water. However, these gifts are given for different reasons, or at least in another state of mind. "What I give to the water," she says, "is actually from within, while this [giving of sandalwood] is something ritualistic." What is lacking from Feroza's interaction with the fires is, seemingly, attachment at an emotional level—a core ingredient in personal relationships. We will now turn our attention to her emotional attachment to the water deity and the connection between her mother and the water deity.

"So it's like one celestial mother and one earthly mother."

The main aim here is to analyze Feroza's attachment to the water deity, one that may be construed as a mother-daughter relationship. Related to this question is also the theme of gender. Feroza's self-identified inability to relate to men is arguably transmitted to her relational engagement with non-human entities such as deities. Above we saw how Feroza was attracted to certain wells, and that she used to visit and pray at the Bhikha Behram Well every day when she was working nearby: "I used to feel very close—once again, I think it's got to do with my temperament, always attached to the mother; so I could never relate to a male god; I was happy worshipping a female deity." It is not only Feroza's robust relationship with her mother that extends to the sphere of gods but also her inability to relate to men. We saw how Feroza interpreted her relationship to the temple fire on the one hand and the water on the other as one of conflicted loyalties between the son and daughter of Ahura Mazda, which can be translated

into a case of a male versus a female god. Analyzing these transmissions could perhaps illumine some of the descriptions of her negative feelings towards the fire as they resemble those she entertains toward her father.

In contrast to the fire, Feroza feels "close" to the well—an emotional closeness linked directly to the attachment which she feels toward her biological mother. Feroza expressed herself very freely during the interviews and pointed out several times that she shared things with me which she had never shared with anyone before. The following quote illustrates this point:

And I'm only telling you in this world, I haven't told anyone else. I always feel, if I have a mother on earth, it's my mother, and there is a mother up there, [and that] is Ava Ardavisur—so it's like one celestial mother and one earthly mother.

While sharing characteristics in the sense of being able to confide in and feeling emotionally attached to both, one is still superior to the other. "Though," she continues, "my earth mother has far stronger hold over me than that mother." Feroza gives an example from her everyday life to elaborate on the difference between the two relationships:

If my mother tells me that "I want you to do this," and I know it's going to be sunset and I may miss out on the prayer, I say: "Ok, never mind the prayer." I'll do the tea or coffee or whatever for my mother and give it to her. So many a times I have sacrificed the celestial mother for my earth mother.

In spite of their current roles described above, when her mother dies, a future event which causes her anxiety, Feroza expects the water deity to assume the same role which her mother now has: "Like I feel that when she's [i.e., her mother] not there, it's this water deity who will stay by me, who will help me, sail me through that bad phase." This is similar to how Arnaz feels about the development of her relationship with the temple fires, although in Feroza's case it is a future course of action. It is the water deity that will provide Feroza with that emotionally nurturing and supportive relationship during the phase she fears so much, a topic which she continually revisits throughout both interviews. Whereas Arnaz seemingly sought such a relationship after her mother's death, Feroza is in a sense already prepared.

Arnaz, like Rustom to a certain extent, highlights communication—more specifically the ability to offload—as the most important element in her relationship with the temple fires. Similarly, to Feroza "relating" means communication or sharing one's personal concerns:

Relating means communicating, being able to talk, being able to give your all. It's not just superficial; it's something very profound. Like nobody is asking us to pray every day, but why do you feel like going there praying, it's getting to be sunset, we have to go, we have to say our prayers before sunset. I think it's—it's something from within; being able to communicate is relating.

"There's nothing similar," Feroza proclaims when I ask her to compare her attachment to the water deity to that of human peers. It is "all different because she is a goddess, so if I have a problem, I will go to her. And I can't go and tell any other human being; it's just not in me—it's not in me." Feroza contrasts her inability to open up to human beings with her ability to communicate with the water deity. In addition to providing a future motherly relationship, what is important to Feroza is that the deity acts as a confidant here and now. As Feroza, much like Arnaz, due to her personality, has difficulty confiding in partners and relating to men, she seeks non-human company to fulfill her relational needs.

Approaching Feroza's perspective on religion as gendered offers a clearer understanding of the contrast between the two relationships: to the fire on the one hand and the water deity on the other. Her difficulty relating to men is not restricted to human beings but extends to deities typically considered male. Since I did not meet Feroza again during the second field trip, the circle-drawing exercise only contains the drawings of her relationship to the temple fire and the "water divinity." Unlike Arnaz and Rustom, Feroza was asked to draw a depiction of her relationship with the water deity first and then of that with the fire (figure 16).
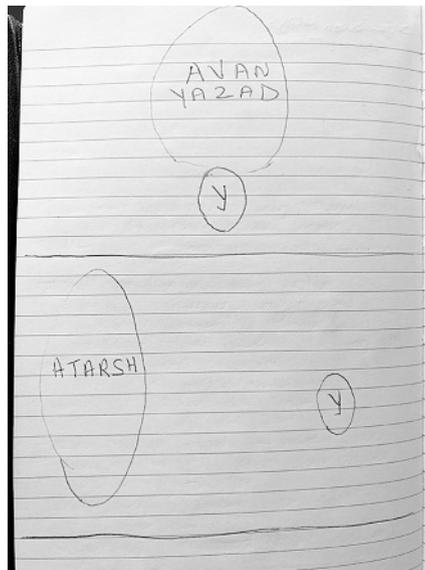

Figure 16: Feroza's representation of her relationships with water and fire respectively (1st field trip).

Feroza's case provides an interesting comparative perspective. The distinction between her relationship with the temple fires and the water

deity respectively is illustrated in the drawings. While the circles remain—at least at face value—similar in size, it is the relative distance between herself and the two entities that stands out: One is close and the other is far away. When I ask her to elaborate on her drawing, Feroza asks: "Have you noticed one thing? This [her relationship with the water deity] is so close, and this [her relationship with the fire] is so distant." I ask if it signifies that she considers the water higher and the fire lower. "No, fire *is* high, but she [the water deity] is taking me in her fold is what I can say." In other words, the entities are of the same divine stature, but only one of them delivers a close and emotionally nurturing personal relationship.

Similar to Arnaz, whose interaction with the temple fires is curtailed when the temple shuts down, Feroza reports that the water deity is unapproachable at nighttime as she "apparently goes to sleep at night, so after sunset till sunrise you should not worship her." A recent development, she explains, is how she wakes up every night at 02:30 to pray—but not to the water deity. That is the time, she says, "when I just communicate with Ahura Mazda; so that's when I have a kind of very strong divine link with God," she says. Her mother's health issues are also a concern which Feroza brings into her prayers, this time to Ahura Mazda: "'At the right time, let her go, let her go peacefully, and you give me the courage.' And it means I'm surrendering myself before God: 'Whatever you do is now acceptable to me.'"

Like Arnaz and Rustom, Feroza finds it difficult to "relate" to an invisible entity. "So for me," she concludes, "Ahura Mazda is of course the ultimate light, but then I can't relate to something I can't see." Arnaz answers a question about the fire referring to God. The same is true for Feroza. It is in the context of sandalwood that I ask whether the fire gives something back to her. She answers: "Whatever I am today is because of God. I mean, not just fire per se, but God. And for us, the only tangible thing we have is fire, we don't have idols … what light [Ahura Mazda] has given us is the fire." This kind of reasoning is, as we have seen, similar to that of both Arnaz and Rustom. The invisible Ahura Mazda (associated with "light") is the ultimate divine reference point, but to reach God, the fire—a visible medium—is needed.

To further clarify the link between fire and Ahura Mazda, Feroza draws a parallel to Christianity: "You have a God, and then you have Jesus Christ, and then you have the cross … so the cross is the physical link you have with God, through Christ; So fire is the link we have with Ahura Mazda, through Zarathustra." An analogy to Christianity and its Trinity appears relatively frequently in the data material in general, especially with regard to discussions about the relation between fire and Ahura Mazda.

At the beginning of this portrait, Feroza is quoted as witnessing a new drive toward spirituality among the youth of the Parsi community. She relates this to her own experience: "Even where my own spiritual progress is concerned, as I said, I could never relate to the fire, but now little by little I do feel that the fire is a *very* powerful medium to pull us towards God." In other words, Feroza is

open to a future course of action where her negative emotions toward the fire can change. Whether this future relation can turn into a personal relationship—including attachment at an emotional level and the degree of confidence and support she feels the water deity offers—is another matter. One particular instance, detailed below, brings Feroza to this conclusion or opening.

"Today I've come to you."

During the two interviews, Feroza mentions a couple of instances when she has specifically approached the fire for help. The first example is more general and relates to when her husband goes to Europe on business trips, about which she feels anxious:

So every time he goes, I just offer sandalwood to the fire, and I talk to the fire, and I tell the fire that "Please, let him go safely, and let him come back safely, please, please, let my husband be safe."

Even if Feroza does not experience the emotions she believes she is obligated to experience when in front of the fire, she nevertheless approaches the fire with pleas for help. The fire does respond as well, and—in contrast to most other respondents' accounts—usually immediately: "Much as I don't worship the fire or show that much affection towards the fire … there are times when the embers actually—when you're actually talking to the fire." Seemingly, the visual movement of the fire is interpreted as a connection and an assurance of the active divine presence. It is, she says, "like an answer you are getting; it's a kind of assurance that God is there." As noted above, Feroza often associates Ahura Mazda and the fire directly this way.

Another episode took place in a period when Feroza suffered from serious and painful health issues. Seemingly, as a last resort she approached the temple fire asking for immediate help. A visit to the fire temple turned out to be the first step toward an improvement of her life, especially with regard to her health condition. After many years of struggling with severe physical problems, Feroza's doctor told her that she might end up in a wheel chair, a warning which she describes as "incapacitating." Feroza reports: "I said [to the doctor]: 'We're too young, please, it's very difficult, how will I run the show? And not to forget my parents, who are also dependent on me for a lot of things.'" Many years later, after numerous visits to various doctors, Feroza decided to go to the fire temple to voice her concerns:

So, I was all alone, and I took the sandal and I told God *ki* "I'm sorry, I've never, never worshipped you, but I don't know why today I've come to you." And trust me, an inner voice told me that I should go and see a doctor in Hinduja Hospital.

The somewhat apologetic attitude toward the fire discussed above is reiterated in this quote. In this case, Feroza apparently directs her prayers of hope to God,

and I ask whether it was the fire or God that answered them: "No, it was definitely the fire because I was looking at the fire and gave the sandal[wood], and I *felt* I had to go to this doctor." Like before, the fire again responded immediately, but this time the response was revealed by intuition. Feroza acted on the response. Having made an appointment with a specific doctor in the suggested hospital, she was advised to undergo past life regression (PLR) sessions. She did so, but not without a certain degree of hesitation and skepticism from both herself and her husband.

As it seems to be of great importance to her, Feroza spends a relatively long time in the first interview describing the numerous sessions she had—all staged in different past lives. The key feature for her is how she was born a Christian in all three, a religion which she could not "relate to"—until now. "And you won't believe it," she explains, "after that my back pain has become much less. It is still there—I'm not saying that that pain is not there." Regardless, despite feeling helped by the fire, her loyalty to the water deity remains intact: "No, it's once again back to the water, it was just that one moment. But that one moment was wonderful; it's never come back again to me—I could actually relate to fire."

2.6. The portraits: synopsis

This chapter has provided a window into the everyday lives of four Parsi Zoroastrians, two women (Arnaz and Feroza) and two men (Rustom and Sarosh).

Arnaz, a lively and critically minded pensioner, moved to Sri Lanka at the age of two, spending her childhood years there. It is her mother's death that provides the immediate context for understanding the initial stages of a bond between her and the temple fires, which gradually acquired the ingredients of a personal relationship. It is the opportunity to offload, to cry before and share her innermost feelings with another—previously characteristics of her relationship with her mother—that makes this new relationship a "wonderful comfort zone." The temple fires provide an opportunity to confide in a relational partner that in some contexts is perceived to be superior to human peers. While friends can offend or be offended, misinterpreting petty remarks as it were, there is no chance of the fire doing the same. The consecrated temple fires have traits which make them, for Arnaz, perfect conversation partners with few needs of their own. Throughout the interviews, one gets the impression that the dissatisfaction she experiences in her present human relationships, especially with her husband, arguably makes her relationship with the fires even more relevant and valuable.

Rustom, a generous and congenial man in his mid-thirties, currently works as a chartered accountant. His background as a priest shapes his relational

account in several ways. Rustom relates exclusively to one fire, the one in his neighborhood temple, which has been an integral part of his life since he was a child. Accordingly, and characteristically of a priestly perspective, Rustom's account of his personal relationship includes elements such as feelings of responsibility and loyalty. The same notions encouraged him to promise his fire a return to perform the *boi* if need be. Rustom links the establishment of a relationship with "his fire" to two elements in his professional life: one connected to his academic profession and the other to his priestly profession. The emotionally satisfying relationship which he now nurtures on a weekly basis originated as a combination of a feeling of social intimacy in the presence of the fire early on in his experiences working as the *boiwalla* and the help he believes that he personally received upon request before his tenth standard final exams. The fire is attributed with abilities and properties which in some cases render it a more complete relational partner, especially with regard to the provision of superior social support and belongingness in an emotionally nurturing relationship. While it is not a main characteristic, Rustom perceives the fire as an empathic conversation partner in whom he can confide.

Sarosh acts both as the head priest and main *boiwalla* in the same temple. Early in his priestly education, he became affiliated with the Ilm-e-Khshnoom movement and has remained a staunch adherent ever since. Sarosh's account on how a close relationship materialized with his temple fire does not include one dramatic or several important events but is rather perceived as the somewhat natural outcome of years of tending the fire as a *boiwalla*. The frequency of such interaction over the years has, from his own perspective, given him access to the fire's day-to-day psychological state. One character-istic of Sarosh's relational account is the feeling of a mutual commitment which he shares with the fire toward a common goal, i.e., salvation. In his capacity as fire priest, Sarosh underlines that he encourages fellow priests and non-priests to develop their own rapport with the fire, and his task as a ritual mediator should make interaction easier but should not hinder other people's efforts to develop their own personal relationships. Over and above, the portrait illustrates to what extent the experience of everyday pressure and a sense of obligation characterizes many priests' accounts of their relationships with the temple fires.

Throughout our two interviews, Feroza, an amiable woman in her forties, stresses several times that she has never been able to relate to fire. Despite a few instances of what she views as successful interaction, Feroza lacks the will and motivation to cultivate an attachment at an emotional level, characteristic of a personal relationship, toward fire. Despite approaching the fire on a couple of occasions for help, and the fire responding, her worship and affection are reserved for the water deity; the extended feeling of emotional support, the ability to disclose personal information, and the strong feeling of emotional attachment are not present in her description of the temple fires. This particular point is evident when Feroza distinguishes between that which she

gives the water deity, described as something coming from within, and that which she offers the fire, which she labels as something ritualistic. Comparing her relationships to the two deities, Feroza talks about a stronger sense of "loyalty" and "allegiance" to the water deity. This is exemplified in the context of worship, especially praying the *Atash Niyaesh.* Despite the fact that she thinks she *should* strike a balance between the two, she goes against a normative notion; she simply does not wish to perform the prayer—she does not want to "improve." At the same time, she also describes her thinking as rigid, expresses a wish to be more open, and seems to regret not being able to give her best to the fire.

Through these portraits, we have gained insight into how individual biographies, personalities, and human relationships, along with religious identities and roles, shape—and to a certain extent are shaped by—their personal relationships with non-human entities. In the case of Arnaz, Rustom, and Sarosh, this entity is one of the many fires in present-day Zoroastrian temples in India. Arnaz's account differs from the other two in that she typically refers to the fires in plural. In contrast, both Rustom and Sarosh relate to one particular fire, which they typically refer to as "my fire." This wording indicates a sense of ownership, but in both cases this interpretation would be somewhat misplaced. Sarosh encourages both his fellow priests and *behdin*s to establish their own rapport with the fire in the temple he is running. Regardless, to relate to *one* particular fire is more typical of priests, who tend to develop a rapport with the fire they are tending on a day-to-day basis. Feroza differs from the other three in that it is the water deity, and not one of the temple fires, that delivers a meaningful and long-term personal relationship.

These four relationships all have distinctive characteristics associated with each individual's biography and personality and have different generative factors offering central contextual information when trying to analyze the emergence of the same relationships. In Arnaz's case, the key generative factor is her close relationship with her mother, where the lack of a comparable relationship among her close family members in the aftermath of her mother's death made her seek support in the temple fires. For Rustom, two key factors stand out: his experiences related to performing the *boi* in front of that specific fire and his interpretation of a successful outcome early in his career as the fire's response to his personal request. Sarosh's account of his relational history is slightly different from the other two in that he does not connect the formation of a relationship to specific events or relatively short periods but rather to the daily interaction with the same fire over several years. Feroza traces her relational narrative with the water deity back to when she had dreams linked to her grandmother's death, which she interpreted as prophetic and included meeting the water deity in person.

As already noted, these relationships have a life of their own as well as their own distinct characteristics. While Sarosh mentions that his relationship with

"his fire" sometimes poses obstacles to him and his interhuman relationships, Arnaz is more categorical than the others in that, by comparison, she prefers relating to non-human entities such as one of the temple fires. A strong sense of commitment, responsibility, and duty characterizes Sarosh's relationship with "his fire." Albeit to a lesser degree, traces of similar conceptions are found in Rustom's account, for example in his promise to his fire to return when need be. Lastly, a gendered perspective is more applicable to Feroza (and, to a certain extent, Arnaz) than the others. The comparison which she makes between her relationship to fires and that with the water deity is characterized by the same kind of a negative and sometimes hostile attitude toward men, epitomized in her poor relationship with her father, and in stark contrast to how she connects socially and emotionally to women, especially her mother. These two relationships provide, in themselves, a crucial context to understand her strong bonding to a female divinity and her antagonistic attitude toward the ("male") temple fire. Related to this, her unwillingness to change and conform to peer (and normative) pressure also characterizes her portrait.

Despite the more obvious and less apparent differences between the four, the consecrated fires are invariably perceived as living entities in need of attention and as plausible targets of relationships. These respondents (perhaps excluding Feroza) consider Ahura Mazda the ultimate relational reference point, distinguishing between two kinds of entities (i.e., fires and Ahura Mazda) and two different relationships. Characteristic of all four respondents' accounts is that they perceive their relationship with their non-human companion of choice as one providing an opportunity to self-disclose to a trustworthy listener providing social support and potential help in different spheres of life. Despite this, they differ in how such relational partners are conceptualized. Arnaz, for example, perceives her relationship to the fire as a kind of friendship, whereas Rustom rather draws an analogy between himself and the fire as a child and parent.

This chapter has explored how individual factors and processes, such as individual biographies, personalities, and human relationships, together with religious identities and roles, shape—and to a certain extent vice versa—the respondents' personal relationships with non-human entities. The following chapter adopts a broader and more theoretical perspective.

Chapter 3: Analyzing the Fires

The previous chapter explored how individual components and processes such as people's biographies, personalities, interhuman relationships, religious identities, and roles shape and are shaped by their personal relationships with non-human entities like the sacred temple fires. This chapter adopts a broader perspective by exploring how sociocultural, ritual, material, and methodological factors and processes contribute to the formation of respondents' relationships with temple fires. In particular, three theoretical perspectives inform this analysis: exchange theory, affordance theory, and social support.

This chapter is divided into seven sections. In the first, I identify and outline the different ways to talk about fires and how these relate to each other. In the second section, I discuss how respondents come to perceive and treat the fires as living, individual, and biological entities by focusing on how sociocultural processes and the material context of the temple inform folk perceptions of burning fires as relational entities. The third section applies "exchange" as a lens to investigate interhuman relationships (i.e., between priests and non-priests), but with a special focus on how ritualized gift exchanges in the temple are the foundation upon which respondents form long-term relationships with the temple fires. In the fourth section, I demonstrate how the fires are believed to provide social support, which is perceived by some respondents as superior to what their human peers can deliver. In the fifth section, I address the questions of why people need (or want) such relationships to begin with, and what kind of entity the fires are. In the sixth section, I take a critical post-fieldwork view on the process of collecting the data, exploring to what extent and how I, as a researcher, had an impact on respondents' perceptions of the fires. In the seventh and final section of this chapter, I summarize the findings.

3.1. Introduction: ways of talking about the fires

In this introductory part of chapter 3, I address the following questions: What are the different ways of talking about the fires in everyday conversation, and how do these relate to each other? How prevalent is the *relational* way of talking about the fires? How many relate to fires, and what are the main differences between men and women, between priests and non-priests, and between different age groups?

Firstly, I briefly outline and analyze the most predominant ways of talking and reasoning about fire among the Parsis as they appear in my source material. The *core concept* is "fire." Having applied a pragmatic methodological approach involving several phases of coding, I have identified *key concepts* which continually occur in reference to fire: "holy," "energy," "prayer," "help," "Ahura Mazda," and "attachment."[1]

Once assembled, these concepts form a *cluster,* connecting a new set of sub-concepts which frequently recur with the main combination (e.g., "fire–holy").[2] Identifying these different clusters was made possible through a qualitative re-reading of the coding by searching for word occurrences and frequency. The clusters are not meant to be exhaustive but should be read as an attempt to provide an overview of distinguishable ways of talking about the fires.

A key finding is that most of these clusters' occurrences do not constitute mutually exclusive ways of talking about the fires to which a respondent commits or not. They are distinguishable but still part of a shared vocabulary drawn on in different social contexts, such as more formal interviews or informal conversations. As I show below, paying attention to these clusters is helpful in making sense of a range of aspects with regards to fire, including rituals and personal experiences.

3.1.1. The fires as holy energizers

The *holy cluster* consists of seven sub-concepts. Most respondents associate, in one way or the other, fire with aspects of holiness as an emic term. Concepts typically concurring with "fire-holy" are "sacred," "spiritual," "pure," "consecrated," "respect," "worship," and "bow" (or grammatical variations thereof). These concepts typically refer to *status.* The first five words (i.e., *holy, sacred, spiritual, pure, consecrated*) are adjectives typically referring to the elevated status of fire in three ways: They are used to compare and distinguish between ordinary and consecrated fires, to signal degrees of status between different consecrated fires, and to separate Zoroastrian from non-Zoroastrian fires. One prominent way in which these concepts often combine is when respondents state that the fires are "holy and sacred," or "holy and spiritual," both of which are typical phrases in the source material.

The last three words (i.e., *respect, worship,* and *bow*) are used both as verbs and as nouns and point to status *and* a religious mode of interaction. Thus,

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1 In this introductory section, I sometimes refer to "everyday talk" instead of repeating "ways of talking." I do so to improve text flow but also to indicate that, while the findings discussed in this section are firmly grounded in the data material (and coding process), the findings (and my interpretation of them) are also based on many informal conversations throughout both field trips. It is my impression that much of the content of these informal conversations reflect everyday talk regarding fires among Parsis.

2 The concepts located in these different clusters sometimes appear simultaneously.

worship implies not only action but also that the fires are "worthy" (of worship). This, in turn, signals a high level of religiously conditioned social status. More than the other clusters analyzed in this section, the *holy cluster* is sometimes applied as a whole in chains of reasoning about the temple fires: A consecrated fire is holy and therefore pure and worthy of worship, worship necessitates respect, and the culturally conditioned correct way of showing respect is bowing.

One quote is helpful in showing links between everyday talk, practice, and normative assumptions. Gulrukh, a middle-aged woman, recounted a story about her son. A child at the time, he reacted to discovering fire out in the wild:

From our childhood, we have been taught about fire, how holy it is. Whenever from childhood we go to a fire temple, we bow. So because this is a green colony, whenever someone would be burning leaves or anything there, my son would stop and start praying there because it was fire (laughing). For him that was important—it was fire! And you'll tell him [that it is not consecrated]; "But this is also fire," he'll tell me. See how much it goes into your mind from childhood that fire you have to worship?

I wish to draw attention to how Gulrukh differentiates between consecrated fires associated with temple fires and non-consecrated fires. The key concept (i.e., "holy") is used to signify a high status, where "bowing" and "worship," two other concepts in the cluster, are also mentioned. In addition to showing a case of religious transmission, the quote also exemplifies how normative assertions are at play: The status (as holy) is typically reserved to consecrated fires in the temple, but any fire is potentially subject to worship by some.

Another cluster of interest is the *energy cluster,* which includes a small set of concepts revolving around "fire–energy" as the main connection. Among the associated words, we find "vibration," "battery," "recharge," and variations thereof (figure 17).

Fire gives off energy in the form of heat. In a Zoroastrian fire temple, non-priests are denied access to the consecrated fires in the proximity necessary for sensing its heat. That might explain why the *energy cluster* typically involves a more abstract and unspecified kind of energy.

In my source material, "energy" is most commonly described as the very essence of fire. Consider Nirosha, a woman in her late sixties with whom we will become more acquainted in a later section. Here she describes why she is drawn to a specific village fire:

In that village, where there are only about five–six people, and only one or two of them go to the fire temple and pray—maybe their prayers are very sincere and everything, but I feel more people going, more people praying, more people, this thing; fire gets more energized.

Nirosha sketches a scenario where, in most cases, the more people pray, the more a fire gets energized. This is not the case with this particular fire, however, where fewer people are praying, but the fire still seems to be
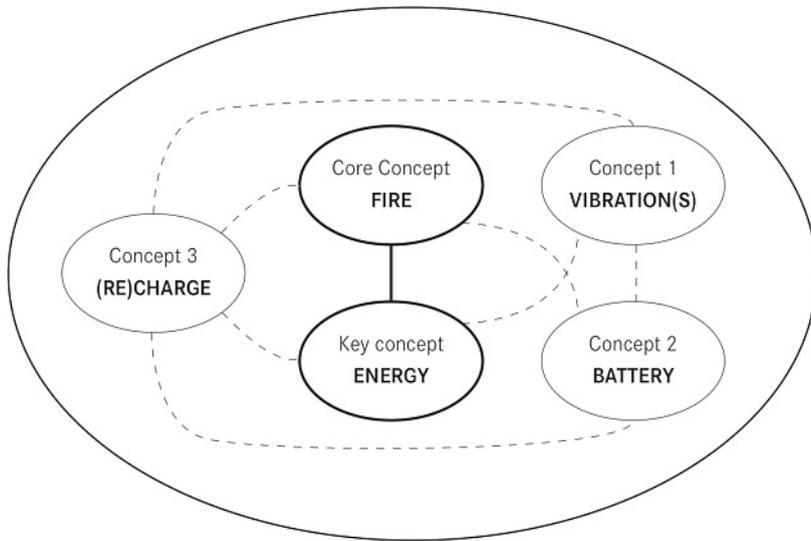
Figure 17: Diagram showing potential connections between concepts in the "energy cluster."

sufficiently energized. In this case, it appears, it is not quantity but quality of prayers that matters.

Furthermore, temple fires are believed to energize the worshippers, and it is in this particular context that the conceptual relation between the concepts in the *energy cluster* appears. Fires are energized by humans through the recitation of prayers and the performance of rituals. In other words, "energy" is drawn into respondents' descriptions of the exchange between fires and worshippers in a bi-directional way: On the one hand, fires are thought to provide worshippers with energy, and on the other hand, humans can supply the fires with energy—pointing to a reciprocal relationship.

The last two concepts, "battery" and "recharging" seem to refer more to the end result of energizing, both at a mental and at a physical level. For example, Rustom likens the process of standing in front of the fire to being mentally and emotionally recharged. Another respondent, Havaspas, a younger *Atash Behram boiwalla*, explains how conducting the *boi* ritual has the same effect on him: "It's like sort of automatically I'm like energized—automatically! That energy comes automatically just like that … it means [that I am] recharged. I'm actually recharged, my batteries are recharged." Like Rustom engages in prayers to feel mentally refreshed and recharged, Havaspas experiences the same level of revitalization through conducting the *boi*.

"Vibration(s)" is a concept often occurring in tandem with the main combination (i.e., fire–energy). This happens in two main ways: The recitation of prayers is thought to produce "vibrations," and the temple fires are said to

produce "vibrations," which remain within the temple. Roshan, a woman in her early sixties, painted her neighborhood temple in vivid, energy-related language. I was shown around her house in Shapur Baug while she talked about her neighborhood *agiary*, the popular Aslaji temple:

Aslaji *agiary* is a very, very beautiful [temple] … it's a *powerhouse* of energy—tremendous vibrations are there! People have so much faith in our fire temple, in Aslaji fire temple, [that] they come from the USA, they come from the UK, they come from Andheri, Bandra, and wherever.

Temples are thought by many respondents to preserve such varying degrees of "vibrations" and "energy." Such vibrations denote a kind of substance, mainly of a positive nature, obtainable by temple visitors, which can lead to a range of beneficial things. A similar conception is also present in the following quote. I met Behnaz, a woman in her mid-forties, on a frequent basis during both field trips. Below she lists the positive outcomes of visiting a fire temple:

When I step out of the *agiary*, I generally have left it all behind in the *agiary*—anything negative—and I'm out as a better person; that's what I feel. In fact, any time I have a problem, I just step into the *agiary* and I just—I may not be praying even; I mean just going there sitting in front of the fire. I just look at it, adjust my eyes, and I get into deep meditation. I enjoy that. I soak in the good vibrations that the fire is giving. That helps me to get rid of all the negative thoughts that I may be having for any reason whatsoever.

A temple visit can be, according to Behnaz, a transformative experience. In this instance, "vibration" is connected to a substance in which one can immerse and where the fire is thought to be able to neutralize or transform negative energy and vibrations. This quote also nicely illustrates the way concepts, albeit identified in clusters, recur and are used in tandem with other concepts. In this case, "vibration" is associated with certain kinds of meditative practices (discussed shortly).

Interestingly, there are no cases in the source material of respondents suggesting that the fire(s) may produce negative energy or vibrations. This relates to a general point: The fires are more or less exclusively construed as positive agents.

Humans, however, can transfer negative vibrations or energy to the fire. Anahita, a woman in her late forties, discusses temple visits during menstruation cycles. Upon being asked whether the fire can feel offended in any way and for any reason, she responds: "I'll tell you when that happens. If the fire is shown disrespect, or us women are having our periods, [we] are supposed to be unclean and emit negative energy." Energy is again understood as a substance that can be transferred to and from individuals, and in this instance, menstruating women are thought to emit negative energy.

Analysis of the final coding shows that twenty-five of my fifty-four interview respondents employed word combinations or words associated with

the *energy cluster*.[3] A slight majority of these respondents were either advocates of Khshnoom teachings or persons affiliated with the movement. The spread of the concepts associated with this cluster has an identifiable historical trajectory: They were first popularized by theosophists and later made known to many Parsis through Khshnoom teachings, which remain influenced by theosophy.[4]

3.1.2. Fires as focal points in meditation

Countless mornings I woke up to the soft sound of prayers being recited combined with the sweet smell of fire in the house of my landlord, a daily routine which in his case included cleaning and preparing the prayer table and doing the *kusti*. The *meditation cluster* is an assembly of concepts revolving around the main combination (i.e., fire–prayer). Associated with this cluster is a range of concepts which, when connected to "fire" and "prayer," often refer to meditational practices and techniques.

Fire is utilized as a medium for and in meditation, either through focusing or meditating *on* one fire while standing or sitting in front of it, or through visualizing fires outside the fire temples. Praying is one central mode of religious interaction among the Parsi Zoroastrians. The concept of prayer appears in many different contexts throughout the interviews and is one of the few concepts associated with each and every cluster analyzed in this section. For example, we saw earlier how prayers both energize the fires and produce vibrations.

The concepts frequently recurring with the main combination in the *meditation cluster* are: "concentrate," "focus," "meditate," "visualize," "emptiness," and "calmness" (and grammatical variations thereof). The last two words (i.e., *emptiness* and *calmness*) more often refer to the stated goal— or felt outcome—of these practices, whereas the first four (i.e., *concentrating*, *focusing*, *meditating*, *visualizing*) refer to cognitive strategies as well as goals or outcomes.

In this study, more than ten respondents made use of and combined words in this cluster, typically when elaborating for what purposes they approached the fire. Six respondents, including Arnaz, explicitly described their practices in front of the fire as meditation, and/or their mode as meditative. Three

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3 In this context, "employ" means making use of words or word combinations more than once during an interview.

4 Founded in 1875, the Theosophical Society appealed to many Parsis in its initial decades but gradually became less popular in the 1900s (Hinnells 2015a). There is an ongoing debate on the extent to which the Khshnoom movement became a Zoroastrian version of theosophy. A more realistic position, and the one taken here, is that the truth lies somewhere between important spokespersons' (e.g., Sarosh) complete denial of the existence of such an influence and Hinnells' view of the teachings as a kind of "Zoroastrianized theosophy" (2015a, 168).

respondents in this sub-sample stated that that they had been influenced by what they identified as Hindu contemplative practices, through either reading books or participating in workshops.

Historian of religion Michael Pye (2007, 17) notes how ritualized words, such as recitation of sacred texts, are used as a form of meditation. Among my respondents, two kinds of prayer are prevalent.[5] The first is the recitation of Avestan prayers, which can be seen as a form of meditation. The connection between recitation and meditation was clear to Amjad, a man in his late thirties:

The fire acts as the focal point because then otherwise the thoughts—a lot of the time, even when you're praying, your thoughts do tend to stray. If you do not understand the language [of the prayers] entirely, then your thoughts are moving in all sorts of directions; so one of the things this [fire] probably does is to focus you back onto the thing—it keeps your attention.

Focusing on the fire enables and helps Amjad to maintain focus whilst meditating on ritualized words. "Focus" and "attention" appear together with both the core and the key concept. Choosing an optical metaphor while describing the fire (i.e., a "focal point") underlines its function in keeping prayers in focus and shutting out random and mundane thoughts. Like Amjad, Tanaz, a university student in her late twenties, utilizes the fire to gain focus:

I just go, stare at it, and look at it. Sometimes I have no thoughts; I just look at it. I just observe it. And I choose my corner very close to the fire … I just choose like the nearest column and I sit by it, where I can see the fire. I just sit. There are times where I've been absolutely blank for like thirty minutes just looking at the fire and doing nothing. Just being calm.

For Amjad, the fire helps to keep his thoughts in check. Tanaz rather describes the end point of meditation: a sense of calmness and a state of mind devoid of any activity. Observing the fire helps Tanaz enter this state.

Meditative practices typically take place in front of the temple fires, but sometimes fire is utilized as an object for meditation in the home sphere as well, especially in the form of small oil lamps (*diva*s). A daily routine for many respondents, both at home and in the temple, is having such burning *diva*s while reciting Avestan prayers.

Scholars studying Zoroastrianism rarely pay attention to meditation and contemplative practices. Likewise, the ideas and related practices are not given any further attention in the analysis section of Kreyenbroek's *Living Zoroastrianism* (2001), even though meditation is mentioned in four of the interviews. The findings presented here suggest that more attention should be devoted to the topic in future studies on everyday practice and belief among the Parsis in India.

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5 A more elaborate discussion of different kinds of prayers is found later in this chapter.

The last three clusters are predominant and will be unraveled and discussed later in this chapter. The *agency cluster,* where "help" is the key concept, relates specifically to the level of agency, or ability to perform actions associated with the temple fires. Concepts which frequently concur with the key combination (i.e., "fire–help") are "boons," "blessings," "strength," and "guidance." A slight majority of the respondents associate the consecrated fires with an ability to provide actual help in different spheres of life.

In everyday talk, the temple fires often constitute the nucleus of many attempts to relate to Ahura Mazda, a kind of ultimate divine reference point. In the *Ahura Mazda cluster*, the key concept is "Ahura Mazda," where again the concepts typically refer to the status of fires but are more specifically related to Ahura Mazda or other divine beings, as well as to the role of fire both from a more theological perspective and its connection to everyday practice. Associated concepts are: "symbol," "representation," "link," "son," and "medium."

Finally, the *relation cluster* denotes a small assemblage of concepts where the key concept is "attachment," occurring frequently with other concepts such as "relation/relationship," "connect/connection," "affinity," and "bond" (and grammatical variations thereof). Respondents typically employ these concepts, combined with "fire," for two purposes: either to elucidate that they frequent one or a few fires, or to imply that they have a special link to one specific temple (e.g., by growing up close to one). Importantly, employing these cluster concepts when talking about fires did not always suggest that the respondent in question perceived the fire as a social agent or as a plausible target for relationships—but it often did.

The portraits show three examples of respondents engaging in personal relationships with one or several of the temple fires. In the following paragraphs, I take the opportunity to examine to what extent one can generalize the findings deriving from the portraits in the sample as a whole and explore possible intra-sample differences between men and women, priests and non-priests, and between different age groups.

3.1.3. Developing relationships with fires: who and how many?

Twenty-five respondents—close to half of the total sample—expressed notions and delivered reports from their day-to-day lives which fit the definition of basic relationships as presented in chapter 1: They frequently interacted with one or several temple fires, typically through gift exchanges and conversational prayer. In turn, these interactions altered their behavior due to perceived responses from the fire. This sub-sample included sixteen men and nine women. As such, the present findings suggest that among my respondents, men were more likely to establish such basic relationships with fire(s) than women. However, whether this finding reflects a wider gender-

based tendency in the broader contemporary Parsi Zoroastrian community in India is open to debate.[6]

One complicating factor should be noted: Nine out of sixteen men in this sub-group were either practicing or retired priests. What may at first appear to be a gender-based difference in relating to the fires is more likely to be due to the fact that only men serve as priests. Arguably, the findings show that religious role rather than gender constitute the main factor with regards to predicting basic relationships among respondents since priests are more likely to establish these relationships to the fires than non-priests (or at least communicate that they do so). Excluding priests, the sub-group includes an equal number of women and men (four) establishing personal relationships with fire(s).

Personal relationships are basic relationships which include four additional components: an interaction pattern distinct to the participant(s), elements of personal self-disclosure, attachment at an emotional level, and the creation of a relational history. Cases of sixteen respondents, including Sarosh, Arnaz, and Rustom, can be analyzed as personal relationships matching this operationalization. Nine of the sixteen respondents were priests. This correlation suggests that priests, especially *boiwalla*s more readily form personal relationships with fires, possibly due to their extensive interaction with them.

During my interview with Khosrow and Parendi, Khosrow touches upon the common expectation that the priests tending the fires should develop a closer relationship with the fires than priests not tending the fires and non-priests:

The *boiwalla* should have a closer relationship. Some of the *boiwalla* priests, because of their closer relationship [with the fire], they advance spiritually, which we laypeople cannot do so easily. We have to do it by other means. They do it by tending to the fire relentlessly, disciplined—absolutely disciplined.

Comparing priestly and non-priest relationships with the fires, I have identified five main differences. First of all, the relational narratives priests build both to structure and to make sense of their relationships are more elaborate and detailed than those of non-priests. Second, priests typically stress a higher degree of emotional expenditure on their end of the relationship than do non-priests. Third, and related to the latter point, a strong sense of responsibility towards the fire characterizes priests' accounts. The case of Sarosh is one illustrative example. From the perspective of non-priests, the fire is less dependent on them, and their relationship accounts are not characterized by the same sense of mutual interdependence typical of priests' descriptions. Fourth, priests typically describe these relationships as

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6 Moreover, such a study would require a larger quantitative survey to complement more inter-
   view-based methods.

much more intimate based on their day-to-day interaction while tending to the fires. Finally, most priests refer to the fire as "their fire," an expression suggesting a notion of ownership. Dinshaw, a retired priest in his late fifties at the time, touches upon this subject when describing a situation where he assumes responsibility for the fire at a temple for a week:

The regular priest was put there by me, he's so happy because he is relieved for five, six, ten days that I'm there. I tell him, "You sleep, I'll go and tend to the fire, I'll do whatever." He knows that I will do it; so sometimes he takes a trip and everything, so I'm happy about it. But the thing is, sometimes what happens is you relate to the fire. You relate to the fire, but there are other priests who do not want that you should interfere. They find it interfering.

In other words, a relationship with the fire can have an impact on people's interhuman relations. From such meta-relational features, we turn our attention to other, more pertinent variables: gender and age.

Gender is as relevant in the study of Zoroastrianism (Mehta 2007; Rose 2015a) as it is to the study of religion in general. According to Jenny Rose (2015a), Zoroastrianism has developed historically as a "patriarchal religion … [where] the liturgical life of the religion is in men's hands. Zoroastrian women have largely been excluded from holding higher religious positions and becoming priests" (277). Not having the opportunity to join priesthood was of no concern for most of my female respondents, at least not if one judges by the interviews alone. However, during both field trips, two issues related to gender differences were brought up repeatedly and labeled as discriminatory practices: The fact that women marrying non-Parsis are denied access to the fire temple and other important religious places; and that women are excluded from many parts of the ritual domain due to their physiology, especially during menstruation or after giving birth (Rose 2015a, 273). Any fire is particularly vulnerable in such periods, and Rose (2015a) further says that some women "on their cycle do not perform any domestic activity that involves fire" (281). Anahita (quoted above) used the metaphor of negative energy to reason on the subject.

The second-hand observation sample includes data from fifty-three randomized observations and shows that a majority (thirty-five) of the observed were women. It is of course not possible to generalize from these findings, but they do indicate that more women than non-priest men visit the fire temple. As no research has been done on gender differences specifically in terms of temple visit frequency, a comparison is not possible.

There were no unambiguous differences between men and women concerning relationships with the holy temple fires. As noted, eight non-priests—four men and four women—described what I have analyzed as personal relationships. Below I argue that visiting the temple and engaging in ritualized exchange sequences is one important generative mechanism in producing notions of relationships to begin with.

If we take the four portraits as a starting point to analyze gender, one tendency revealed by both Arnaz and Feroza is that their interhuman relationships provide key contexts to understand their relationships with their non-human entity of choice. Both had strained relationships with men in general, particularly their fathers, and strong relationships with women, especially their mothers.

A gender perspective can also be applied to the Zoroastrian concept of the divine (Rose 2015a). Ahura Mazda is considered a male (and supreme) divinity by all respondents, viewed as the father of all humans as well as divine beings. Fire is also often—but not always—perceived as a male entity. Most respondents, like Rustom, interchange the masculine third person singular personal pronoun ("he," "him") with the neutral third person singular ("it"). From a normative and textual perspective, the fire is seen as the son of Ahura Mazda contrasted to the daughter (i.e., Ava Ardavisur). However, respondents' accounts varied in this respect. For Feroza, this distinction is crucial in that she uses the genders of fire and water respectively to explain why she visits the neglected daughter (i.e., water) as opposed to the popular son (i.e., fire). Only one respondent, Arnaz, wonders whether the fire's gender could be feminine rather than masculine. When responding to whether she had experienced "problems" during her interaction with the fires, she answers: "No, I've never thought of it, I've never had a problem, I've never had a problem. Whatever I feel, he knows the best. Why *he?* It could be a *she.*" This is but one of several cases in her interviews where she questions the gender of the fire.

Finally, age is also a relevant variable in this discussion. Being a non-priest respondent aged between twenty and forty is a relatively strong predictor of a non-relation with the fires. Most of my respondents in this age group rarely visit the fire temple and generally have a more secular outlook. Interestingly, a lay theory often echoed by respondents is that bonding with fires is for those visiting the *agiary* on a regular basis.

I interviewed a newly married couple together, Afarin and Jawahar, both of whom were in their late twenties. When asked if and when they visited the temple, they answer:

Afarin: Not that often, like probably on a birthday?
Jawahar: On a good day!
Afarin: On a big day!

At the end of the interview, late during my second field trip, they asked me about my research results, like many respondents did. I elaborated on my main topic of interest and revealed that many respondents feel that they have an emotional attachment to one or more fires. Judging by their (brief) responses, this was something new to them:

Jawahar: I didn't even know all these things which you're saying now.

Afarin: That's the first time I've heard that.

Jawahar: That's intense!

Associated with the same age group, another variable predicting the absence of a relation to the fire is the fact that some of these respondents report a utilitarian attitude towards the fires, seen as objects of focus—instruments for meditation-like practices. Some, like Tanaz (in her late twenties) and Amjad (in his late thirties), were categorical that the fires are not to be considered social agents or plausible targets of relationships—at least not for themselves. After stating that she sees the fire as an instrument for meditation and not communication, Tanaz is prompted to elaborate on why the fires are treated by some as such: "And I think it also depends on people's mind—mindset— when they go. Like there are some that go with a completely depressed state of mind, so, you know, they might treat the fire as another person, and they might actually talk to the fire." Tanaz suggests that it is people's state of mind and not belief which determines whether people treat the fires as communicative beings. In her case, the temple fires are not utilized for communication and support but rather as a means of achieving a non-agent goal (e.g., peace of mind).

Coming to an end, this section has reviewed the most prominent ways of talking and thinking about the fire in my source material. I have identified different clusters which are not to be seen as mutually exclusive when related to everyday talk of fires but rather as consisting of conceptual resources used by many Parsis in different contexts.

The argumentative structure of the following five sections is as follows: Subject to individual variation, I argue that notions of relationships with the temple fires arise as a result of several interconnected processes and factors. These are different processes of a) ritualization, and b) socialization, combined with c) individuals' speculation on the nature and being of fire, d) exegesis of religious texts, and e) self-reflection on a number of issues such as past experiences. In the following section, I consider how sociocultural processes (e.g., ritualization) and material contexts inform folk perceptions of burning fires—in our case the consecrated fires in Zoroastrian temples in India. The construction of a consecrated temple fire signals the start of a transformative process where several fires are collected and combined into one consecrated and holy fire, enthroned in the temple and accessible as a potential relational partner to its devotees. What cultural and perceptual processes are at play when Parsis approach the fires as social agents and candidates for relationships?

3.2. Affording fires

For many Parsis, a visit to the fire temple provides a multimodal encounter. The smell of the sweet fragrance of burning sandalwood and frankincense, the sound of fellow worshippers reciting Avestan prayers, and touching and/or kissing the marble steps leading up to the fire chamber all contribute to a rich sensory experience. Seeing the burning fire on the elevated fire vase is also a part of this. The fire's visible properties like the color of the flames, the intensity of movement, or its relative size is not what most respondents emphasize when describing it. One reason for this occurrence, I suggest, is that when Parsis stand in front of a temple fire, first and foremost they perceive its *affordances.*

3.2.1. Gibson's affordance theory

Affordances are a main component in psychologist James Gibson's (1977, 1979) theory of human perception, which calls attention to the ecologically relevant resources potentially available in the immediate environment of not only humans but any given organism (1979). More specifically, affordances refer to what any given object in the environment "*offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill" (1979, 127). An important feature of the theory is that objects in the immediate environment provide opportunities for actions, wherein lies their ecological importance. A chair-like object affords sitting in, a ground-like surface affords walking on, and a stone-like object affords throwing (and possibly killing) (Gibson 1979).

Gibson's perspective was and still is considered a radical departure from conventional psychology and cognitivist perspectives for two reasons. Firstly, the latter perspectives assert that humans scan the environment and perceive different objects insofar as they are able to discern their qualities and properties such as size, shape, color, elasticity, and so forth (Gibson 1979). Gibson, on the other hand, maintains that rather than its qualities, "what the object affords us is what we normally pay attention to" (134). Secondly, from a cognitivist perspective, in the attribution of meaning to different kinds of input a "significant amount of perceptual information is provided by the brain itself" (Geertz 2014, 150). In contrast, Gibson's and similar ecological approaches devote more attention to the *relation* between the observer and the object, where affordances are seen as persisting latent in the object, inviting action under the right circumstances. In other words, the object itself provides important perceptual information beyond mere hints. However, whether objects afford specific actions is always relative to agents and their physical capabilities and attributes. A chair-like object affords sitting in only if the object's height is relative to the person standing in front of it, and so forth (Gibson 1979).

From an ecological and environmental point of view, the ability to control *fire* constitutes one of the major steps in the cultural evolution of humans (Darwin 1871/2009; Gowlett 2016). Stephen J. Pyne claims in his fascinating book *Fire: A Brief History* (2001) that fire has deeply influenced the character of life for humans. In brief, he says, fire has "become a selective force and ecological factor that guides evolution … and bonds the physical world to the biological" (15). From an affordance theory perspective, the affordances of fire for early humans were manifold and provided a remarkable new set of opportunities. Heating, improved hunting, direct treatments of other substances—especially the cooking of meat, warding off predators and insects, and lighting that could illuminate dark places, were all features which could extend the day and possibly prolong lives as well (Lynn 2014, 983; Gibson 1979, 36–38). At the same time, fire also affords various injuries and possible deaths.

Some scholars applying an evolutionary approach have also suggested a social function of fire (e.g., Lynn 2014; Wiessner 2014). Lynn (2014) holds that campfires "have provided social nexus and relaxation effects that could have enhanced prosocial behavior" (983). Without engaging in a broader discussion on the subject, one of the most commonly stated benefits respondents pointed to when I asked them what they typically felt after leaving a fire temple was the feeling of calmness and mental peace. Whether this is the direct consequence of the fire or not is difficult to ascertain, but it nevertheless suggests a link between the two.

Fire has long been utilized for rituals. Many religions, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism included, have fire gods in their pantheon connected to sacrificial fires perceived as messengers establishing contact between humans and gods (Payne and Witzel 2016). Fire also occurs as a potent symbol or powerful beings in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Christianity, well-known examples are the burning bush that was not consumed by the flames, the pillar of fire in the desert, and God in the stories of Moses and the Exodus together with the "tongues of fire" settling on the apostles' heads in the narrative of Pentecost. In Islam, *jinn*s are a group of entities, also referred to as "fire spirits," which Allah created from a smokeless flame: "He created man from sounding clay like unto pottery, and He created *Jinn*s from fire free from smoke" (Quran *S*55: 14–15, in Ali 2005). Iblis (later Shaytan) is perhaps the most recognized *jinn* and is said to have disobeyed Allah when refusing to bow down to Adam, justifying his disobedience by pointing out that he is made from fire, in contrast to Adam, who is made from clay (Kelly 2006).

Returning to present-day Zoroastrianism, the issue I discuss in the following paragraphs is how an object, i.e., a temple fire, and its perceived affordances are reconfigured when utilized for ritual and religious purposes instead of more functional purposes associated with fire as those described above. According to Gibson, the basic affordances in territorial environments are usually perceived directly without a lot of learning (1979, 82). Con-

sequentially, the crucial role of culture in relation to many objects' affordances remains somewhat of a missing link in Gibson's theory of human perception.[7] In sociocultural settings, object perception is determined by multiple factors such as the material context and social environment in which the object is located or cultural norms and expectations in addition to individuals' understandings and predictions, to name a few. In the present-day religious practice of Parsi Zoroastrians, folk perceptions of the holy temple fires constitute an illuminating case of how culture informs and shapes folk perception of a naturally occurring phenomenon with a large set of ecological and functional affordances.

3.2.2. Ontologizing the fires

The ritual construction of temple fires constitutes one relevant process of ritualization as a source to features characterizing people's perceptions of the temple fires. The source material shows that knowledge about how the fires are made combined with the increased ritual attention following such a transformation leads to folk speculation on the nature and being of fire. The end product, I argue, is how many respondents perceive and treat the fires as living, individual, and biological entities. My overall argument is that these three features are, in different ways, crucial in construing the fires as potential targets of relationships. Before turning our attention to the role participation in ritualized gift exchanges plays in solidifying notions of relationships with the temple fires, the following paragraphs are devoted to this first stage of transforming fires from ritual objects to subjects of devotion.

As presented in chapter 1, there are three grades of fire among the Parsis. The ritual construction of a fire of the second and first grade, *Atash Adaran* and *Atash Behram* respectively, comprises five stages: Collection, purification, consecration, merging, and placing (or so-called enthronement). The process of consecration confirms the fire's transition to a new status: from a set of fires mainly utilized in human professions and activities to one consecrated (thus holy) fire available for religious purposes, in particular worship and relationships. The question is: How do such ritual procedures and processes—and knowledge of them—play a part in promoting folk conceptions and perceptions of the fires as living, biological, and individual entities?

The focus in this section is not on the intricate ritual procedures involved in making the fires, but rather on how folk ontologies and everyday practices are formed and legitimized by the knowledge of the same processes—a kind of ritual knowledge, often down to the level of specific and intricate details, which is known beyond priests and religious experts.

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7 This is not because Gibson and his heirs disregarded culture as an important variable but rather because they were more interested in unmediated perception, so-called "coupling."

Respondents list several factors determining the distinction between consecrated and non-consecrated and between Zoroastrian temple fires and those of other religions: the length of time used, the amount of effort made to complete the process from start to end, the number of prayers recited throughout the procedures, and the fact that the fires are made to burn continuously in the temple. These factors provide clues for the special ontological status of fire.

The first noteworthy distinction from the point of view of folk ontologies is between two qualitatively different types of fire: consecrated and non-consecrated (or ordinary) fire, such as those burning in households: "It's just not a normal fire," Hoshang, a freelance priest in his late twenties, says; "There are thousands of ceremonies performed on that fire, and then it becomes so powerful." Hoshang is here referring to the making of a *behram* fire, picking out the amount of prayers as the main distinguishing factor between consecrated and "normal" fires. Hoshang also points to the commonly held idea among the Parsis that the temple fires are capable of accumulating prayers and rituals, increasing their powerfulness as a result. This idea also has a textual basis in the *Atash Niyaesh* (see discussion below).

Some of my respondents also employed inter-religious comparisons to underline the difference between ordinary, or non-consecrated, and consecrated fire. At one point during our conversation, I ask Khosrow, a non-priest, why non-Parsis cannot visit the fire temple. He answers by pointing to the status of a consecrated fire:

You don't need to be a Zoroastrian to worship fire; fire is not limited to the Zoroastrians. Every religion uses fire in their ceremonies. The only thing is, in Zoroastrianism we give a very special status to the fire by consecrating the fires. The other fires are not consecrated. We consecrate the fire; that means we make it holy.

According to Khosrow, then, the fires worshipped in Zoroastrian temples are essentially different from those of other religions, a quality gained through the process of consecration.

As noted, a key feature of the fires is how they are—with all that this implies—considered to be living entities. Two factors are important when respondents make sense of this ontological constituent: How the construction process imbues them with life, and the subsequent ritual tending of the fires. Firstly, for Khojeste Mistree, the process of consecration not only implies giving the fire a special status but is also perceived to be what imbues the fires with life: "So when you think about that, a Zoroastrian fire is not a matchstick fire; it is a fire that has been infused with life through complex rituals." Inter-religious comparisons were also made to stress the contrast between fires in different religions. In the following quote, Jamasp, a priest, contrasts—somewhat derogatorily—the *murti* in a Hindu temple to the fire in a Zoroastrian temple:

This [the fire temple] is not like even a Hindu temple, where the deity is there, [the] *murti* is there … The *murti* doesn't need anything to eat or anything. Here [in a Zoroastrian temple] there is a living entity; that is the difference between a Zoroastrian concept of fire and the Hindu concept of a *murti*. It is that we are—we are worshipping a living entity, whereas other religious symbols are manmade symbols … whereas this is a living entity, just like a human being, you cannot put your son, you cannot put you father [and say]: "You stay here for fifteen days without food, I'm going outside, I'm going to Bombay." No, you can't. So, it's a living entity; one cannot leave.

Even though *murti*s are habitually fed, dressed, and washed—in other words, treated as living beings—this priest contrasts what he calls the "manmade" *murti* to a temple fire, a living entity in his opinion. In this specific case, the ontological status of the fires as living beings implies that they have physiological needs which a *murti* does not have, analogous to—but still different in kind from—those of human beings. The fact that fires are treated as living entities has further implications for the priests in charge, Jamasp underlines, required as they are to always be present in the temple to avoid a religious catastrophe (i.e., the fire dying out).

This brings me to the second point. The fact that the daily ritual maintenance of the fires, the *boi* ritual, is referred to as the "feeding" of the fires, that the wood offered to the fires is called "food," and that the temple fires are commonly seen as "hungry" both legitimizes and reinforces the conception of the fires as living entities in need of constant attendance.

During my field trips, I came to realize that one issue debated among some Parsis is whether or not people should stand up when the *boi* ritual is conducted, and to whom one should offer such respect: the officiating priest or the consecrated fire. Addressing this issue, Feroza explains why some people, like herself, choose to remain seated during the *boi* ritual:

This is the time when the fire is getting its food to eat, that's when all the sandal is being offered to the fire. The fire is eating its food, so why do you need to stand up and disturb the fire? Because every time you stand up, the fire looks at you.

Despite the expectation put forward by some that one should be standing while the ritual is going on, Feroza maintains that people must be seated so that they do not disturb the fire while it is "eating," concluding her reasoning with an implicit reference to the *Atash Niyaesh* prayer (i.e., that the fire is observing the worshipper). References to eating fires, and by extension the ascription of a digestive system, are relatively common in the source material. The analogies to humans are even more explicit in Behnaz and Dinshaw's accounts. "The moment you feed some fuel to the fire," Behnaz says, "[it is] like a little boy who has not eaten for ten days. How would he look? And then when you feed him his first bite of it—it is the same way (laughing)." Using "fuel" instead of "food," Behnaz approaches the issue with an analogy to

humans when she likens the temple fire to a hungry boy to describe how the fire will react when it is (finally) given wood during a *boi* ritual. Dinshaw provides a similar analogy albeit reflecting his priestly position and hence perspective. He assumes the role of the mother, and the fire is the child: "Now every now and then, if you go, you know, it's like a mother and child. The child should not start crying, [and if] the mother knows that it's time for a feed, then immediately I will go and put wood." Implying a strong sense of urgency, the mother (i.e., priest) must react to the child's (i.e., fire) call for food.

Not only are the fires regarded as living entities, they are considered individual entities, sometimes with distinct personalities. Two main features attributed to the fires illustrate this point. Firstly, the degree of power differs among these temple fires, where "power" typically refers to their efficiency in granting boons or giving blessings to worshippers. The power of individual fires is thought to increase owing to ritual actions by priests and devotional efforts from laypeople, while a decrease in power could be due to a breach of purity regulations, such as when a non-Parsi comes into direct visual contact with the fire. In many villages, the previously consecrated temple fires have been degraded to the status of a lower-level fire or even reduced to non-consecrated fires. Related, the grade of fire is also important here in that most Parsis consider the eight *behram* fires, especially the Iranshah fire in Udvada, as by default more powerful than the *adaran* fires.

I interviewed Darius, a chartered accountant in his late sixties, twice during my first field trip. In his view, a fire's relative age can raise its status: "In a fire like my Udvada *Atash Behram*, which is itself about 1,300 years old—it is itself a divinity … because thousands or millions of times *Atash Niyaesh* have been prayed to it." Secondly, the perception that consecrated fires should not, or according to Sarosh, *cannot* be merged, is based on the idea that the fires are individual entities with distinct and—to a certain extent—human-like personalities:

A lot of people say: "Oh, we should amalgamate them." How can you amalgamate? He's a different person, I'm a different person—can both of us be joined together? What will you do, you will cut your right hand and put [on] my left hand? My tongue and your heart—you can't! You can't kill two persons and make a third person! It is as simple as that!

Sarosh uses the impossibility of merging two biological (i.e., human) entities as an analogy to explain why temple fires, also individual entities, cannot be merged.

3.2.3. Redefining affordances

Anthropologist Webb Keane (2014) observes that the material characteristics of religious icons, where they are located, and the actions people perform with and toward them "serve as affordances for further actions and reflections on

them. They are invitations and provocations" (318). The same applies to the consecrated temple fires and the present case. The visual, sensual, and material context of fire worship, along with ritual actions performed by priests and the behavior of other devotees provokes and invites reflections on the ontology and nature of the consecrated temple fire. Subsequently, and crucially, these trigger relationships.

From an analytical point of view, one way to see the ritual process of constructing a consecrated temple fire of the second (i.e., *adaran*) and first (or highest) grade (i.e., *behram*) is as an institutionalized attempt to redefine affordances originally associated with fire by making them inaccessible. The religious rationale for the meticulous five-step consecration process described in chapter 1 is to collect a set of fires used for their "real affordances," a term suggested by Norman (1999). "Perceived affordances" refers to what we *think* we can do with an object, and "real affordances" to what we can *actually* do with an object. The result of the construction process is one holy fire, placed in a fire chamber inaccessible to everyone but the officiating priest. This new material (and social) context not only accentuates its new status and reconfigures its nature but also underlines that the fire is taken into another physical environment of perception. A set of purity-oriented procedures regulating movement and access are put into action, adding to the aura of exclusivity surrounding the now consecrated fire.

Despite the fact that the fire provides warmth in the temple (at least for priests) as well as light (being the only source of light in the temple as it is believed that any other source would reduce the status and authority of fire), the process of consecration eliminates access to (most of) the fire's original (and "real") affordances—its possibilities for action—effectively paving the way for a new set of affordances.[8] These are: religious worship, a religious connection to God, meditation, and relationships.

The most noticeable affordance is distinctly religious, normatively and doctrinally prescribed. A holy temple fire affords religious actions in two

8 As an aside, in chapter 1 I briefly described the earlier practice of Parsi Zoroastrians of having hearth fires continuously burning at home. From the perspective of affordances—and the present discussion—this practice is interesting in that such fires, for many, combined both real or functional affordances, such as cooking, and religious affordances, such as worship. In addition, some respondents, like Arnaz, also hint that such home fires also took on a level of social affordances. Arnaz elaborates: "My uncle used to line us all up in the night and we used to pray; it was a lovely feeling." That fire, she says, was not consecrated:

But at this particular fireplace, was there in all the Rustom Baug homes, and my aunt had it. Till my aunt passed away—a little before that—her daughter-in-law was renovating the place … I somehow felt emotionally that this was severing connections not just with that fire, which wasn't actually a consecrated fire. You know, tradition is from the time, because my grandmother's house and my aunt had moved in, and like you know, that kind of a relationship that you have with the fire. Which is not just lit, it's been there. It's been there, I wouldn't say for generations … though it was not a consecrated fire. But it was tended and kept burning and embers were kept twenty-four by seven for that many years at that stage in Rustom Baug.

interrelated ways: worship of divine beings such as the fires themselves and a religious connection to Ahura Mazda (or God). A third kind of affordance is how the temple fires afford meditation. More a result of individual interpretation, this affordance is not prescribed. The main affordance discussed in this chapter, however, is how the temple fires afford potentially long-term and meaningful *relationships.*

Discussing religious objects, Ann Taves (2014) notes that one topic often a matter of dispute in groups—in some cases violent ones—is whether and "to what extent the affordance is available through other means, for example, through other persons or objects or through the development of new abilities" (93). One example is when access to the main affordances of religious objects is the domain of religious experts, such as priests, who either govern access to them directly or act as mediating agents between lay worshippers and superhuman beings.

In the present case, physical access to the burning fires of the first two (or highest) grades is restricted to officiating priests, who act as requisite attendants of the fires. From within a ritual frame, especially the *boi* ritual, the officiating priest also acts as a necessary intermediary in the exchanges between worshippers and the temple fires. In everyday practice, however, a perception commonly shared by priests and non-priests is that the priest functions as a *facilitator* but in no way governs access to the worship of the fire and people's attempts to connect on a relational level.

We have seen that action possibilities—that is, possibilities of action readily perceivable by an actor—of any given object are relative to the observer's qualities, physical attributes, and cultural conditioning. Nevertheless, a commonly shared perception among the Parsis is that better praying skills and sincere intentions make worship of the holy fire more efficacious *and* facilitate attempts to connect to Ahura Mazda.

Key to affordance theory is how the object itself gives away clues about its affordances, or more specifically its proper operation (Norman 1999). In contrast, in the present case the fires' social affordances are rather made plausible by the combination of a range of *external* components such as the material culture and ritual nexus in addition to other people and their actions and individuals' reflection on ideas and personal experiences. All these elements combined provide contextual cues or signifiers pointing to interaction and relationships.

The consecration process and subsequent ritual attention reconfigure a fire and transform it into an individual, biological, and potentially immortal being in need of physical and spiritual nurturance. In contrast to fire utilized in ritual practice in Hinduism, in Parsi Zoroastrianism a consecrated fire of the two highest grades is made to continuously burn. I propose that this feature is relevant in the present discussion for several reasons. Firstly, a fire made to burn continuously is a good candidate for the attribution of *life* since it has features "typical of living things, such as motion, unpredictability, generation

of heat, and growth" (Guthrie 1993, 52–53; Brown and Thouless 1965, 36). In folk biology, motion is viewed as one key criterion for whether or not something is to be categorized as a living entity (Dolgin and Behrend 1984; Yorek, Sahin, and Aydin 2009).

A continuously burning fire makes the feature of motion an enduring and not occasional trait of the fire. This feature, I argue, is key in suggesting a trait which characterizes perceptions of the temple fires as living entities— perceptions which are reinforced by the fact that the *boi* ritual is viewed as the "feeding" of the fires, the wood is labeled as "food," and the temple fires are commonly seen as "hungry." All these factors both legitimize and reinforce the conceptions of the fires as living entities in need of constant attendance.

Moreover, a shared perception, especially among priests, is that the fires are dependent on humans in order to survive, which creates a sense of urgency in how the fires are tended. For priests, this is one way by which feelings typical of personal relationships (such as emotional attachment) arise. Dinshaw, a retired priest, declares that the new ontological status which comes with consecration is of importance for the development of an attachment between him and the fire: "But as far as emotions are concerned, you can have emotions only with fires that are existing, and you know that is continuously existing." Furthermore, priests typically underline their great responsibility to keep the fire sufficiently stoked as one of several stressors associated with their work. For priests, *boiwalla*s in particular, tending the fires also includes tasks such as cleaning the fire vase and washing the chamber. Sarosh, among other priests, highlights such daily routines and regular attention to the fire when trying to explain his emotional attachment to "his fire."

3.2.4. Affording the fires: summary

By asking what fire affords, affordance theory informed the current analysis by providing an opportunity to examine how sociocultural processes work together with material contexts to create notions of relationships with the temple fires as conceivable.

I have shown how priests and non-priests respectively link their perceptions of the fires as living, biological, and individual entities with the process of making these fires and their subsequent statuses as consecrated. The attribution of life to objects and notions emerging from such a conception imply relationships, but such notions do not have to precede perceptions about the fires as social entities available for relationships. I only wish to underline that such conceptions are often linked to the consecration process and the implications of it (in terms of a continuously burning fire in need of continuous offerings of food, i.e., wood). It is, however, participation in ritualized exchanges that embody such notions of relationships and provide the main structure for repeated social interaction—an essential ingredient of

relationships. A driving force behind the production of the social affordance of fire, i.e., relationships, is ritualized exchanges in a religious context transformed into real-time gift exchanges in an everyday context.

3.3. Fires in gift exchanges

> It's the basic idea that matters, it's the basic … attitude of the person that counts; it's not what you give or how much you give. The fire is *as* pleased with the poor man giving a small stick of sandalwood as it is with a rich man giving a ton of wood (Khosrow 2012, first interview).

> One of the first groups of beings with which men had to enter into contract, and who, by definition, were there to make contract with them, were above all the spirits of both the dead and of the gods (Mauss 1990, 16).

3.3.1. Introduction

During one of my many hang-out observation sessions in front of the Rustom Framna Agiary in Dadar, chatting with the guards while keeping an eye out for potential respondents, a local middle-aged man with a purple-red *topi* came riding his scooter with his two kids. When he parked right by the main entrance, he raised his eyebrows to acknowledge my presence (we had met before), while his kids, giggling, ran up the stairs on their way into the temple. "Giving sandalwood," he half-yelled, half-whispered to me in his distinct way, "it's easier that way," he grinned, suggesting that they were in a hurry. The aromatic sandalwood (or *sukhar*) is the most common type of wood "given," "gifted," or "offered" to the fires by the laity, while logs of babul wood (PGuj. *kathi*s) are the main supply to maintain the temple fires throughout the day.[9]

Exchange, as one kind of interaction, is not restricted to humans (de Waal 1997). However, the intricacy and manifold nature of interhuman exchanges are "among the most distinctive features of social life, and differentiate us strongly from all other animal species" (Cosmides and Tooby 1992, 206). In

9 Data from the second-hand observation show that approximately ninety percent of the people observed brought sandalwood and placed it on one (or several) of the connected *gah* slots.

Figure 18: Rustom Framna Agiary by night.

this third section of chapter 3, I focus on one essential part of the day-to-day activity in Zoroastrian fire temples in India, namely *exchanges*. Broadly speaking, this section applies "exchange" as a theoretical lens to explore everyday Parsi Zoroastrianism, especially practices associated with the temple and its immediate surroundings. In particular, I draw insight from exchange theory to explore the interaction between priests and non-priests, devotees and the temple fires, as well as Parsis and non-Parsis.

Comprising a range of approaches in a wide area of disciplines (Alles 2000), exchange theory is not an integrated (sub-) field of scholarly inquiry. According to Sykes (2005, 3), the discourse on exchange has shaped social theory since the Enlightenment. Analyses of reciprocity and gift giving—both central to the present analysis—have been prominent in anthropology.

Types and norms of exchange pervade most religions in the world (Parry 1986; Alles 2001), and Zoroastrianism is no exception; exchange and related concepts, such as charity, have ancient roots (Palsetia 2007, 86; see also Tandberg 2009). In the study of religion, exchange analysis has been applied to two different, yet often interrelated, kinds of interaction.

Firstly, studies exploring exchanges among humans, in particular between laypeople and religious specialists (e.g., monks, nuns, and ascetics), have been extensive. Such studies have been predominantly focused on the Hindu tradition (Brekke 1998). Analyses of religious giving (San. *dana*), both in the Hindu (Mauss 1950/1990; Parry 1986), and Jain (Laidlaw 2001) case, have been influential beyond the study of religion.

Secondly, and relevant to the present analysis, comparatively fewer studies have been devoted to systematically exploring exchange interactions between human and non-human entities such as gods (notable exceptions are e.g., Stark and Finke 2000; Palmer 2011). Still, a simple application of reciprocal exchange models of interhuman interaction to interaction with gods provided one of the earliest theoretical frameworks for analyzing religious sacrifice as governed by a *do ut des* principle: "Sacrifices are gifts given to gods or ancestors in the hope of receiving a gift in return" (Alles 2000, 111).

Turning our attention to the present analysis, exchange, as defined in chapter 1, is here treated as a sub-class of interaction.[10] Reciprocation typically refers to the act of exchanging goods, either material or non-material, for mutual benefit—a concept often intermingled with gift exchange itself (e.g., Kranton 1996).[11] In exchanges, humans return favors, and gods do so according to belief. Cycles of exchanges are formed when sequences are repeated departing from the initial one.

In the following paragraphs, I distinguish between *reciprocal* exchanges, where a sequence is completed (i.e., goods are returned), and *gift* exchanges, where there is a temporal vacuum and a degree of uncertainty involved, as the initial gift need not be reciprocated.

My main argument going forward is the following: Partaking in ritualized exchanges—reciprocal in nature—is the main factor in corroborating respondents' notions of the fires as social agents and as plausible participants in relationships, such as long-term and personal relationships of a dyadic kind. In their ritual form, these exchanges are reciprocal in that the return gift (i.e., the ash) is given immediately. In everyday practice and beyond its ritual format, they turn into gift exchanges in that an element of uncertainty is added whether the gift is reciprocated.

3.3.2. Zooming in on the *boi* ritual

Subject to variation, the day-to-day lives of many Parsi Zoroastrians are "ritualized from early morning to late at night" (Stausberg and Karanjia 2015, 369). Rites of purification, such as the *padyab-kusti* (Pers.), often follow actions such as waking up, going to the bathroom, or taking a shower. Such everyday ritualization extends beyond the domestic sphere.

As noted, among the Parsis a day is divided into five periods, or watches (*gah*s). The officiating priest performs the *boi* ritual at the change of each period.[12] This ritual configuration determines many respondents' temple

10 I defined an exchange as an interaction sequence between two (or more) participants comprising two main steps. Questions arising from this conceptualization of exchange are: 1) What is the kind and value of resources exchanged? 2) What is the prospective frequency of such exchanges? 3) What is the ontology and identity of the participants (who or what gives and who returns)? 4) What different types of exchanges are there? 5) What are the individual motivations underlying exchanges? 6) How great is the potential time lag between giving and returning? 7) What social benefits are generated from participating in exchanges? 8) What are the cultural norms, rules, and guidelines among those exchanging?

11 Reciprocity can also point to the motivation underlying the act of giving back, often based on culturally shared norms within a given social group (Grieg and Bohnet 2007).

12 Among the Parsis, priestly rituals are distinguished between outer (e.g., *jashan*s) and inner (e.g., *boi*) liturgies. This distinction is based on spatial boundaries, where the latter require a demarcated ritual precinct for the performance of rituals and necessitate a high maintenance of ritual purity (Stausberg and Karanjia 2015, 371).

routines as they make a point of visiting the temple during one of the five daily performances, which constitute for many the (ritual) climax, particularly during visits to the Iranshah fire in Udvada.

Recitation of Avestan prayers is the key verbal element in most Zoroastrian priestly rituals, which "also engage non-verbal acts such as gestures and actions and material things such as instruments and substances" (Stausberg and Karanjia 2015, 366). The ritual form (or structure) of the *boi* is of relevance to the present discussion because it involves a ritualization of *several* kinds of relationships.

Before entering the ritual precinct, the *boiwalla* undergoes the required purity procedures.[13] The uniform worn by the priest consists of predominantly white garments symbolizing purity. The gloves and pants with tight leggings are meant to prevent ritual pollution from dust and dirt, and a mouth mask (Pers. *padan*) is used to prevent the priest's breath (and saliva) from tainting the fire.[14] The priest enters the inner chamber and steps onto the *pavi*, a rectangular space demarcated by furrows whose inside is considered a consecrated area. The necessary ritual instruments or *alat*s (Arab.) hang on the wall to the left when entering.[15]

The priest holds the ladle, the main ritual instrument, in his left hand. The ladle comes into contact with the *afarganuy* while the priest goes around the fire clockwise reciting a prayer. Subsequently, the priest, still holding the ladle in contact with the vase, proclaims the formulas *dusmata* (Av., "bad thoughts"), *duzuxta* (Av., "bad words"), and *duzwarsta* (Av., "bad deeds") to dispel evil while striking the connected bell three (or nine) times at each proclamation.

The next, and final, stage makes the exchange structure apparent. The collected sandalwood provided by laypeople during the previous *gah* is placed atop the fire whilst the priest recites the *Atash Niyaesh* prayer repeatedly.[16] Unlike many other sorts of wood, sandalwood has an inherent quality of preserving the aromatic fragrance for decades. In concordance with the direct meaning of *boi* as offering incense (or perfume), priests typically underline the importance of the fragrance emanating from the sandalwood when reasoning about the wood offering; it is a smell which the fires are said to enjoy.[17]

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13 Both the ritual procedures and purity measures connected to the *boi* ritual vary per the different grades of fire. A *behram* fire, for instance, requires more elaborate and time-consuming procedures.

14 Mixing the two elements (i.e., fire and water) is considered defilement in Zoroastrianism and measures are taken, even beyond the temple, to avoid blending the two.

15 Ritual instruments refer to any "ceremonially consecrated object used in high liturgies" (Kotwal 1990, 217).

16 An *adaran* fire requires three while a *behram* fire requires more recitations of the *Atash Niyaesh* depending on which *gah* one is in (Choksy and Kotwal 2005).

17 Most non-priest respondents typically focused on the gift-function of offering sandalwood and

Subsequently, the priest transfers ash (PGuj. *rakhya*) to a tray outside the chamber, applying it on the forehead of attending devotees. If the priest is not in attendance between the rituals, non-priests take and apply the ash themselves.

By limiting our focus to the sociological significance of the *boi* ritual, in line with Houseman and Severi's (1998) relational approach to ritual, several relationships unfold. From such a perspective, the structure of the *boi* ritual and connected practices implies and defines relationships between participants—human as well as non-human. Patterns of exchange characterize two of these. Before focusing our attention on the main subject of this analysis (i.e., exchanges between fires and devotees), the following paragraphs consider relations between priests and non-priests based on patterns of exchange.

3.3.3. Exchanges between priests and non-priests

There are three grades of priesthood among the Parsi Zoroastrians, a hereditary profession running exclusively through male lineage. The basic initiation is called *navar*, which "concludes the priestly training and publicly confirms the ability of the candidate" (Stausberg and Karanjia 2015, 374). A priest who has undergone the *navar* is called an *ervad*. A second initiation ceremony (i.e., *martab*) is established for those "who will actively pursue the profession of a ritual priest" (Stausberg and Karanjia 2015, 374),[18] where one level completion is referred to as a *mobed*, that is, now eligible to perform inner rituals (or "liturgies"). The highest level, not requiring initiation but a public *jashan* ceremony to be solidified, is that of a *dastur*, an honorary title given to prominent priests (Stausberg and Karanjia 2015). *Boiwalla*s constitute a sub-class of priests whose main duty is to oversee the day-to-day ritual tending of the temple fires.

Performance of and instruction for rituals remain the main daily tasks for priests in contemporary India, and non-priests establish relationships with

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not on the effect of the fragrance on the temple environment. There were exceptions, however, like Behnaz: "So everyone likes sweet-smelling things," she says, "everybody—even you and me—in the material world like anything that is fragrant. Similarly, in an *agiary*, why do we offer sandalwood? Because that is fragrant, sandalwood has a fragrance of its own, which we offer to Ahura Mazda, or to the fire."

18 The *samel* is a special examination which Udvada *boiwalla*s tending the Iranshah fire need to undergo. Khursed, a younger *boiwalla*, describes the examination in this way: "Wherein the student who's gonna give the examination is standing right in between all the priests, ok? Any [number] of priests can come here; I mean priests of Udvada, not anywhere else in the world. Any [number] of priests can come, and they can ask you anything—absolutely anything and everything, ok? And it may take one hour, it may take two hours, it may take the whole—it may take five hours. Or you may finish off in twenty minutes. Ok? So, that is how a *samel* examination is conducted. And after everything, the head priest … will decide whether you are eligible or [not]. It's like an exam, a normal examination, where you pass or where you fail."
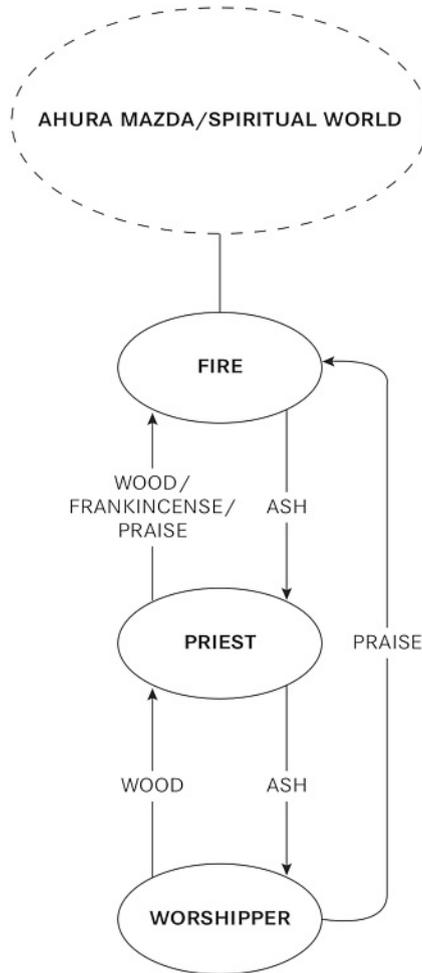
Figure 19: The ritualized exchange interaction between the worshipper, the priest, and the fire.

priests or with priestly families which can endure for generations (Stausberg and Karanjia 2015). Priestly income mainly derives from performing certain rituals or reciting prayers upon request framed as a reciprocal exchange, following the logic of *balanced reciprocity* (Sahlins 2004), where the two parties agree that there is a balance between the price quoted and the goods offered.

Based on the *Gathas*, Almut Hintze (2004) argues that a triangular pattern of exchange characterized the relationship between gods and humans in the Indo-Iranian society preceding Zarathustra, where the ordinary man "was not able to enter into a direct relationship with the deity" (28). The interaction

pattern was one between gods, patrons, and poets. It is this triangular relationship that persists today, Hintze claims, in that "priests perform rituals at the request and on behalf of members of the laity, who pay for them" (2004, 44). The temple manager (or *panthaky*) sets the prices of rituals/prayers for each temple. Prices may vary among temples by approximately twenty to thirty percent.[19] Bargaining on prices is considered unacceptable.

Everyday interaction between priests and non-priests constitutes yet another exchange pattern. The offering of wood to the fires described above is often combined with a monetary contribution placed on a tray connected to the fire chamber. This contribution is sometimes called "the gift on the ladle" (Boyd and Kotwal 1983). Laypeople are expected to donate money, which is partly used for the maintenance of the temple (e.g., purchasing wood supplies) and partly distributed to priests for personal use. In contrast to the exchange pattern described above as based on balance, this exchange is more ambiguous in nature.

From the outset, the "gift on the ladle" has the characteristics of a "pure gift," where reciprocation is not anticipated. The notion of a "pure" or "free" gift, defying the nature of exchanges in the sense that nothing is returned, "has been largely neglected in anthropology" (Laidlaw 2000, 617). Jacques Derrida (1992) identifies four necessary constituents for something to be called a pure gift. Firstly, there is no reciprocity; otherwise, it would be an exchange. Second, the *receiver* of the gift must not recognize it as such, since that would lead to a Maussian type of debt or an obligation to return.[20] In other words, a main characteristic distinguishing "pure gifts" from gift exchanges is that the former are not thought to create bonds between participants. Third, the *giver* must not consider the gift as such, since doing so would lead to self-congratulation in that one gives "back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given" (Derrida 1992, 14). For gifts to be considered "pure," Derrida (1992) concludes, "it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that it not be perceived or received as gift" (16). When these criteria are met, Laidlaw (2000) argues, "it does not create personal conceptions and obligations between the parties" (617).

From an analytical point of view, the so-called "gift on the ladle" is not in fact a "pure" gift even if it is framed as such. The gift meets only one of Derrida's criteria in that the monetary contribution is depersonalized. The contributions collected are said to be made by "the laity" and not individual laypersons, and only then distributed among the priests. However, most non-priests, when reasoning about the gift, explain that the "gift on the ladle" is

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19 Michael Stausberg, personal communication.

20 Marcel Mauss (1950/1990) programmatically starts his essay *The Gift* by stating, "exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily" (3). Three components characterize gift interactions: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate (39).

given to priests for tending the fires and for them to continue to do so in the future. In other words, the structure is somewhat similar to the first exchange pattern, where money is given in return for rituals on behalf of the individual. The main difference, then, between the first exchange pattern (i.e., a balanced reciprocal exchange) and this ladle gift is that the latter is rather believed to strengthen the bond between priests and laypeople *in general.*

Based on my own observations, there are indications that this practice is lifted out of its immediate ritual sphere. On several occasions I observed while sitting on the temple veranda that such gifts (i.e., monetary contributions) were given directly from individuals to the officiating priest when on a break in between the *gah*s.[21]

Hoshang questions the actual strength of the bond between priests and non-priests on the basis of such gifts. He partly blames laypeople for what he terms the ridiculously low income of the priests: "See," he says, "if a person can afford a hundred rupees [worth of] sandalwood, can't they afford to give ten rupees to a priest?" He continues:

They can easily give fifty rupees also. But see, that's what I'm saying, to *Atash* … they'll give so much sandalwood; 100 rupees [or] 200 rupees [worth of] sandalwood, but to [the] priest they'll give only five rupees, ten rupees, twenty rupees. This is ridiculous! If they can afford to buy [expensive] sandalwood [for the fire] … can't they afford to give more to the priest?!

Hoshang's indignation becomes apparent when he exemplifies the low income of priests by contrasting laypeople's generosity toward the fire compared to priests, suggesting that they should be treated on a more equal basis. The interactions between priests and non-priests also include non-monetary exchanges such as the example below demonstrates. Sarosh explains:

Some people do come to me and open their hearts; each family has issues— everybody has issues! And so you devise a prayer program for them … so at that point of time, while interacting with the *behdin*, you—maybe once or twice you give your own personal experiences.

In this instance, a relationship between a priest and a non-priest involves both provision of social support and ritual help beyond paid services.

While non-priests are excluded from the actual performance of the *boi* ritual, they are not passive participants. In the ritual interaction between the priest and the fire (i.e., the divine world and the human world), worshippers take part in the ritual exchange by *giving* sandalwood and praise and *receiving* ash. Spatial distance constitutes the most obvious difference between priests and non-priests, as they cannot enter the segregated area where priests perform "inner" rituals. During the *boi* ritual, the officiating priest is thought

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21 One cannot be sure that these monetary gifts were not payments for rituals, but they were typically partly concealed and handed over without any exchange of words.

to act as an intermediary connecting the burning fire with its devotees. However, for most respondents—including most priests—their role as mediators is relevant *only* in the context of performing the *boi* and of minor significance in the personal relationships which respondents form with the holy fires.

Sarosh says that the fire priest should not interrupt or intercede in the interaction between the fire and the worshipper because that relationship is "personal." I regularly conversed with Adarbad during both field trips to Mumbai on the veranda connected to the temple where he worked. He echoes this sentiment when he accuses the Udvada priests of being a "sandalwood mafia" because of the restrictions which force laypeople to offer the Iranshah fire only sandalwood bought in Udvada. Adarbad strongly objects: "You offer the fire [wood] which you have bought with your own money—hard-earned money—it's *your* worship, *your* offering to the fire." In his view, the exchange interaction with the fire is a matter of personal choice, and a third party should not be able to override the dyadic relationship.

With Zarathustra, Hintze (2004) claims, a markedly "new" exchange relationship pattern develops without an Indo-Iranian antecedent and departing from the triangular exchange relation between the priest, patron, and God discussed above. This relationship is a dyadic (or "bipolar") one "between any human being and … Ahura Mazda" (Hintze 2004, 27). This exchange takes place, Hintze asserts, on a spiritual and ethical level, where men and women are involved in a continuous exchange with the deity "by the way they think, speak and act" (44). Beside the ritual structure, another source of ideas, values, scripts, and norms concerning relationships—more specifically exchanges—is the *Atash Niyaesh* prayer, recited by the officiating priest at every change of *gah* and by laypeople at any given time. This particular prayer serves to generate, support, and formulate ideas of exchange between fires and worshippers.

3.3.4. The *Atash Niyaesh:* from spiritual sustenance to relational template

In the absence of a clear-cut and uniform meaning attached to rituals, and without verbal and nonverbal cues from god(s), people typically rely on other external sources such as religious scriptures, texts, devotional literature, and other types of material to provide details about how to understand religious interactions with gods (Bradshaw, Ellison, and Flannelly 2008, 647). For most respondents, exegesis of the *Atash Niyaesh* prayer provides such an external source. Regarding the interaction sequence between worshippers and fires, respondents actively make use of the prayer to legitimize their perceptions and ideas about the temple fires and to make sense of the interaction itself.

As we learned from Rustom, children are taught how to recite prayers in the temple, especially the *Atash Niyaesh.* This prayer serves two main functions in

everyday practice and belief: as part of an offering for spiritual nourishment of the fire and as a template for relationships.[22] Thus, the prayer is both recited and subject to individual exegesis.

When *recited*, the prayer is believed to be the spiritual (i.e., non-material) part of worshippers' offerings to the fires, where sandalwood is its material counterpart. Combined, these two provide the fires with both physical and spiritual nourishment. For many, such as Darius (see above), fires are also thought to accumulate such prayers that over time will enhance their statuses to divine beings in and of themselves.

Versions of the so-called prayer book (i.e., *Khordeh Avesta*), containing both Gujarati and English translations of the *Atash Niyaesh* and other Avestan prayers, are widely distributed (for free) and its content is well-known. Practices vary, but many of my respondents typically recite the prayer in English or Gujarati, but some—particularly those who attend Avestan courses—also made a point of reciting in Avestan. Exegesis of the prayer not only serves to legitimize certain beliefs and practices and—importantly for the present discussion—functions as a blueprint which sketches out some rules but also enables respondents to make sense of the exchange interaction between themselves and the fires. In concordance with the ritual structure of the *boi*, the exchange interaction suggested in the prayer is a kind of gift exchange, but one dependent on one condition: that the worshipper gives the initial gift.

A key topic in the *Atash Niyaesh* is the exchange between worshippers and the fire, and ultimately Ahura Mazda.[23] In the first part (i.e., *Yasna* 33.12–14 and 34.4), the main protagonists are Ahura Mazda and Zarathustra.[24] In the middle part (starting with *Yasna* 62.1), the sacrificial fire is brought into focus, praised as worthy of worship and perceived as a potential bearer of gifts (Kanga 1993). In the fourth stanza, the reciting worshippers take the word: "The person who recites; O Fire, the purifier (of all things) pertaining to Ahura Mazda! Grant (thou unto) me (the things mentioned below)" (Kanga 1993, 79),

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22 When recited, the *Atash Niyaesh* is believed to create "vibrations" or "strengthen" and "purify" the fire (see discussion in section one of this chapter). For Farah, the prayer is particularly efficient as a stress reliever. She is "drawn" towards praying the *Atash Niyaesh*, she says, "Every day possible, sometimes I'll pray twice at home also, after praying my daily prayer at a certain time *Atash Niyaesh* sometimes at home also, I *feel* a little less tense." In Arnaz's case, frequently praying the *Atash Niyaesh* serves as an indicator of her strong commitment to the fire, whereas in Feroza's case, her unwillingness to pray it is interpreted as a lack of a similar commitment.

23 The following presentation is based on the 1993 English translation of the Parsi scholar Maneck Furdoonji Kanga's version of the *Atash Niyaesh*. Despite being somewhat scholarly outdated, it remains a widely read, popular, and accessible version. Had my intention been to provide a thorough exegesis of the text, I would have used another translation.

24 The worshipper propitiates Mazda and pays "homage" to *his* fire, "the Greatest *Yazata*" (Kanga 1993, 73). Ahura Mazda plays the role of "the most beneficent spirit" and "bestower of good things *in return* for prayers," where Ahura Mazda is asked to "grant" the worshipper "gifts" (74).

and subsequently worshippers' wishes are listed (i.e., fourth, fifth, sixth, and tenth stanza respectively).[25]

The seventh and eighth stanzas are of primary importance in this discussion in that respondents, priests as well as non-priests, frequently cite or mention what they interpret as the gist of these stanzas. The seventh stanza reinstates the fire as a potential giver (and hopeful receiver) of gifts: "O Spitaman (Zarathustra)! That Fire of Ahura Mazda carries admonition unto all for whom that (Fire) cooks the evening and noon meals (i.e., gives them good understanding) (and) from all he solicits a good, healthful and friendly offering" (Kanga 1993, 81).[26] While in the seventh stanza the fire requests an offering, in the eighth the fire observes to see whether the visitor has brought one. The eighth stanza reads:

The Fire looks at the hands of all comers (and says:) What does the walking friend bring to the sitting friend? We praise the Fire, beneficent, powerful, shining (or existing) (and) the warrior (against the demons) (Kanga 1993, 82).

Here, the fire's request for a friendly gift from the worshipper becomes more dramatic in that the fire is personified and attributed with human-like features and characteristics. In stanza nine, the order in the course of events is prescribed:

But if any person brings unto that (Fire) either fuel religiously, (with sincere heart) or Baresman spread, or the (fragrant) plant (called) *Hadhanaepata*, unto that (offerer) sanctimoniously, then the Fire of Ahura Mazda being pleased, revered (and satisfied) gives a blessing (as follows) (Kanga 1993, 82).

In other words, the fire automatically reciprocates *if* and when the worshipper gives the initial gift. These beneficial blessings are reciprocated *if* the worshipper brings a quality wood offering to the fire, "dry fuel, examined in the light (and) purified with the blessings of righteousness" (Kanga 1993, 83).

Taken together, the *Atash Niyaesh* prayer outlines the different steps and expected outcome of the interaction between worshippers and the ritual temple fire. This interaction simulates an exchange of gifts, and the prayer provides instructions on what people should give and how, how the initial gift should be handled, and finally what the worshipper can expect in return. It implies that the worshipper must take the first step, or give the first ("friendly") gift, and a counter-gift can be expected if (and when) the worshipper brings an offering of properly inspected wood.

Respondents make use of the *Atash Niyaesh* by referring to the prayer as a whole, individual verses, or single sentences. They do this to legitimize their

25 In the tenth stanza, the fire lists the blessings which the worshipper can expect to receive (Kanga 1993, 83).
26 See Stewart (2007) for a discussion of the different periods of dating of the individual verses and how the prayer draws on the worlds of both priests and laypeople.

perceptions of the fires in different contexts, and use the prayer as a blueprint to help make sense of the exchange interaction between themselves and the fires. In this way, the *Atash Niyaesh* can be said to reinforce while at the same time being reinforced by the exchange structure presented by the *boi* ritual.

3.3.5. From requests to bequests (and back again)

Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) maintain that it is only after people learn sequences of ritual actions that they begin to attach meanings and personal intentions to such actions. This implies, Houseman and Severi (1998) claim, that people typically "have in common a set of actions rather than a unified discourse about them" (226). This assumption also applies in the present case. For most of my respondents, the eventual meaning and function of the *boi* ritual is an issue of minor importance to their day-to-day lives.[27] What respondents do have in common is the set of actions embodying the exchange that the ritual performs—actions which form an integral part of many Parsis' temple routine from a young age through a process of socialization (e.g., social learning and acquisition).

Gifts are persuasive ways of "ameliorating relations" (Van Baal 1976, 167) and are believed to generate, sustain, and cement relationships (Laidlaw 2000, 617). My main argument is that repeated partaking in ritualized exchange interactions generate and, in the next step, reinforce the belief in the fires as social beings, constituting the key mechanism producing notions of relationships between my respondents and their fires of choice.

Rituals are one generative mechanism in the formation of relationships (Nye 2004; Saler 2008) and could "by virtue of their special qualities, provide the basis for persons holding certain ideas/values, for establishing certain relations, for evoking certain non-human entities" (Houseman and Severi 1998, 202). The ritual form and structure of the *boi* ritual facilitates cues for relationships between humans and the divine world, evoking the fire as one kind of non-human entity which, as we have seen, can afford divine help and sustenance.[28]

Priests as well as non-priests typically frame the tripartite combination of wood, praise, and frankincense as an "offering," thereby underlining the gift-

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27 This holds true for most Parsi Zoroastrians in contemporary India, Stausberg and Karanjia (2015) hold, concluding: "The meaning or theology of any of the priestly liturgies (of all categories) is not an issue at all" (372). While the motivation to extract such meaning and function is greater among most of the priests and religious experts with whom I spoke, my interviews and conversations with them show that no uniform (and normative) interpretation of the *boi* ritual exists in everyday discourse.

28 To some extent, the *boi* ritual can be labeled an "incorporative ritual," a term suggested by Saler (2008, 222) to identify rituals undertaken "to establish, sustain, or strengthen positive social relations with … superhuman agents."

giving nature of the act. The general characteristic which religious sacrifices and offerings have in common, Van Baal (1976) contends, is that they are gifts. However, gifts given to humans differ from those given to gods: "What cannot be done when offering a gift to a fellow-man, asking for something, must be done when offering a gift to a god. To do otherwise would be braggish" (170). Accordingly, in everyday practice, most of my respondents add another element to the initial offering, which reshapes the interaction by turning it into a kind of gift exchange.[29] Most respondents do not attach much importance to the ash—the immediate return gift from the fire—as per the ritual procedure, nor do they consider it an essential part of their interaction with the fires. What are essential for most are the *additional* boons and blessings which they make known through petitionary prayers.

Zoroastrian prayers can broadly be divided into two categories: formal and informal. Formal prayers pertain to fixed Avestan or Middle Persian (or Pahlavi) texts or versions thereof in vernacular languages. Priests vocalize such prayers during temple rituals and ceremonies, but laypeople recite them as well—even outside the temple. Informal prayers consist of non-fixed, often spontaneous, and typically non-vocalized attempts at establishing a personal connection with the temple fires or other divine beings.[30] There are at least two different (and relevant) types of informal prayers: *conversational* and *petitionary* prayers.

Conversations in the form of prayer are one central part of respondents' interaction with the temple fires, which are viewed as empathic listeners and trustworthy confidants. Petitionary prayers are typically framed as personal requests for "boons" and "blessings," to use respondents' terms. These two types of prayer are different in structure, tone, and form. Still, they are related in an important way: They are both typically framed as exchanges in the hope of reciprocation—either an answer or reassurance, or a material boon.

In everyday prayer practice, there is often a direct connection between formal and informal prayers in that the former usually mark the beginning of a *prayer sequence*, with the latter following. Such sequences typically start with formal prayers, often a combination of the so-called mandatory (Arab. *farziyat*) prayers and personal favorites, and end with informal prayers, by which respondents relate to the fires in a more personal way.

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29 One debated issue among the Parsi Zoroastrians in India is to what extent the ash has healing properties. The sacred ash is commonly applied on the forehead, between the eyes. Many make a point of dusting off the ash before they leave the temple premises to keep it from coming into contact with impure matter. Several respondents also explained that they believed the ash could have healing effects and applied it indiscriminately on the parts of their body which needed healing.

30 In everyday parlance, (a Zoroastrian) "prayer" often refers to fixed Avestan or Pazand texts (or their vernacular versions) but can also refer to rituals, especially those related to death ceremonies, or informal (and personal) attempts at establishing connection with divine beings.

The connection between offerings and petitions becomes obvious in Feroza's case. She reveals how she goes to the fire temple to pray when her husband travels abroad: "So every time he goes, I just offer sandalwood to the fire and I talk to the fire and I tell the fire that: 'Please … let him go safely and let him come back safely.'" Every time her husband returns home safe and sound, the offering has been reciprocated.

Asking for boons is not exclusive to laypeople. Khurshed, one of the younger Udvada *boiwalla*s, explains that, after finishing the last *boi* in the *Ushahin gah*, when the temple is usually empty, he "just sit[s] next to the fire and just kind of meditate[s]." Then, he continues, "we wish something—we wish for, you know, everyone. I mean [the] normal praying we do—we ask for something, you know?" Khurshed distinguishes between four levels or modes of prayer. The first is Avestan prayers; then a meditational prayer; after that, an intercessory prayer, praying for or on behalf of others; and finally, a petitionary prayer, requesting the fires for additional boons, blessings, or help. Regarding his role as ritually tending to the fire, the last two types of prayer seem to be made valid only when preceded by, or embedded in, the more ritualized duties he must perform, perhaps to mitigate a focus on his ego.

A gift, Palmer (2011) rightly argues, is defined "not by the nature of the thing given … but by the nature of the exchange" (575). I argue that adding petitions to the exchange ritualized during the *boi* ritual alters its structure in two ways. Firstly, it adds uncertainty as to whether the initial gift is reciprocated, which "remains as to the outcome of the interaction until the whole sequence is completed" (Bourdieu 1990, 99). This is a main characteristic of a gift exchange. Secondly, and because of that, it effectively disconnects the priest from the exchange structure as the future responses and interaction are up to the fire. In other words, it makes the interaction a dyadic one (figure 20).

In addition to uncertainty, ambiguity is also a crucial characteristic in the experience of the gift, intended "as a refusal of self-interest and egoistic calculation," while at the same time "never entirely excludes awareness of the logic of exchange" (Bourdieu 1997, 231). Darius' quote above illustrates this point by applying two social analogies when answering whether he always gives sandalwood to the fire:

When you go to the house of your friend, don't you take a piece of cake with you … to munch? … You show that you are happy with that person. Same way when you go to the fire temple; what does the fire eat? [The] fire eats wood, [and] that wood you are *enjoined* to take [my emphasis].

The temple is likened to the house of a friend, and bringing sandalwood is likened to bringing a gift to said friend, a relational signal of goodwill. The difference between the two types of gifts is, seemingly, that giving sandalwood is somewhat quasi-proscribed. In this case, the offering of wood is framed as a gift to a friend, mimicking the *Atash Niyaesh* friendship model (see discussion below).
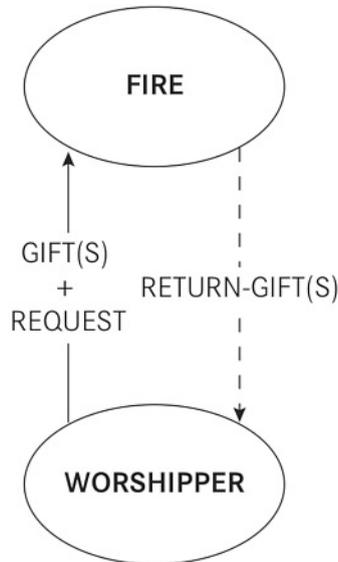
Figure 20: The gift exchange between worshipper and the fire.

The *lag* between the gift and the counter-gift is crucial when we are to analyze the initial good as a gift, and at the same time conceptualize the interaction sequence as an exchange. One aspect distinguishes the present case from Bourdieu's assumption (1990, 1997) that uncertainty persists until the sequence is completed, i.e., the return-gift is given. My respondents gift the fires somewhat indiscriminately. They engage in continuous cycles of gift giving, where gifting becomes repeated and indeterminate, with "little mental 'accounting' of precise gifts and reciprocation" (Palmer 2011, 575). The implication is that continuous gifting makes the eventual response(s) or return gift(s) less pertinent. When and how do the fires respond or return gifts?

The temple fires are thought to engage in exchanges with worshippers by responding to gifts—but very rarely immediately. Exchange interactions with the fires—just like with gods and other non-human entities—arguably require creative and interpretative thought processes as the fires do not easily reveal their intentions, motivations, and feelings to the senses. The most common way of deciphering a counter-gift is the interpretation of daily occurrences or outcomes of it. One example is the positive outcome of a difficult or stressful situation, like in Rustom's case, his final exams and the job promotion which he eventually got.

Feroza interpreted the fires' answer as an "inner voice" which prompted her to go see a specific doctor (who subsequently cured her to a certain extent). A few respondents, such as Farya, a lively woman in her early sixties, interpret subjective psychological states such as "peace" or "calm" as a direct response.

For others, like Behnaz, praying in front of the fire can sometimes lead to an immediate response, revealed through visual signs such as a flicker or a sudden burst of flames:

Now suddenly I'm talking, and suddenly from the center you will see a flame erupt, and when that happens you feel the fire is really responding to you and saying: "Yes, I acknowledge your prayers, thank you for praying to me, thank you for being here with me."

In an illuminating quote, the temple fire is thought to respond directly to Behnaz's "talk" through its visible movements. The experience is framed as a relational encounter where the fire is attributed with a sense of gratefulness, cherishing the fact that Behnaz had visited the temple to spend time with it.

3.3.6. Thanks-gifting

Vows are also made to the temple fires, although they are not as prevalent as in Hindu devotional practice. In general, vows are pledges made to deities to give something or visit a god if something is granted or has a desired outcome. In the context of Parsi Zoroastrianism, relevant to this is the offering of a *machi* (PGuj., "throne") or *kathi*. A *machi* is a sandalwood offering in the shape of a throne made with nine sticks or logs (figure 21), while *kathi*, in this context, refers to a piece of a slow-burning log of wood.

Figure 21: Picture displaying a *machi* ("throne"), taken from the Zoroastrian Museum and Information Center in Udvada (Sanjan).

For most respondents, a *machi* or a *kathi* is offered on special occasions for two main purposes: celebration and thanksgiving. Either individuals or entire families make these wood offerings, which can be requested at any time during the day, or as a part of a yearly offering on the day of remembrance of a person's death (by arrangement with the priest). The priest then recites the name or names of those offering, increasing the social importance of the act.

Some respondents reported that they had on several occasions promised the fire an additional gift, conditioned upon whether the first endowment was reciprocated or not. As Sarosh explains, laypeople ask him to offer a *machi* with the following message: "Oh, Dasturji, we have passed through some difficulty, and we are offering this as a thanksgiving!" Similarly, Behnaz reports that her mother "had a thing about offering a *kathi* when she used to do thanksgiving." When I ask her to elaborate, she explains that it is like a thanksgiving instigated by the granting of a large boon: "Oh well, if something goes wrong in her life, and it gets rectified, she'll immediately offer a *kathi.*" The clearest example is Rustom, who promised the Iranshah fire to revisit "him" and offer a *machi* if his additional request was granted—a promise which he kept.

Such vows slightly modify the gift exchange structure described above. Terms of exchange are set which seemingly contradict the nature of gifts to begin with. In addition, they make mental accounting relevant in that respondents seemingly *must* keep track of whether or not the first gift was reciprocated, since they have promised the fire to reciprocate if and when it responds. Van Baal (1976) notices that while the vow "resembles a condition in a contract," it differs mainly in that it does "not oblige the other party to the deliverance of any good, but only the maker of the vow" (172). In the case of Rustom, the fire was free to respond to his pleas, and he bound only himself in that he promised it a counter-gift on condition that the first gift was reciprocated—a gift "stipulated in the vow" (Van Baal 1976, 172).

A pledge to offer a *machi* if and when the fire reciprocates the initial gift makes the size of offering, and by extension its monetary value, matter. This conception brings us to the discussion about cultural norms and proscribed models of exchange.

3.3.7. Norms of and for exchanges

From an analytical point of view, gift exchanges are defined more by the nature of the exchange and less by the relative value of the gift. This issue matters to my respondents, however. In the following paragraphs, I focus on whether there are shared norms underlying the interaction with the fires, particularly pertaining to the relative value and quality of both the material and the non-material aspect of the initial gift. It is important to note here that I am not suggesting that individual motivations (to exchange) and shared norms always go hand in hand; rather, my aim is to reveal such norms regardless of the degree to which individuals conform to them.

The question of motivation (and expectations) is crucial in exchange theory to the extent that many important typologies have been made with individual motivations as the key describing factor. Bronislaw Malinowski (1922/1984) has had a considerable impact on how different kinds of exchanges are

conceptualized. Malinowski departs from Mauss by classifying exchanges not on the basis of obligations to give, receive, and return, but rather from the point of view of individual motives. Exchanges, he asserts, exist on a continuum from self- to disinterestedness.[31]

Among my respondents, there are shared norms connected to the physical quality of wood (for instance, whether it is properly inspected) as well as an ethical protocol which regulates purchasing the wood in the first place. It is the increase in sandalwood prices that bothers Adarbad when he associates the quality of the wood with the quality of the purchase and the intentions of the worshipper offering it: "Just offer good wood which is properly—no insects inside—which is not stolen [but obtained] with your hard-earned money. Offer it to the fire with the best of intentions—that's all [that] is required." The gift gains its value in a threefold way: through the quality of the wood and how it is preserved, through its ethical acquisition, and through the right intentions accompanying the act of giving. Giving "clean" sandalwood is also a prerequisite for Khosrow because it is considered a "sin" to burn anything rotten in Zoroastrianism: "So for worshipping purposes," he concludes, "the fire has to be given its due respect by putting clean firewood." One of several culturally conditioned ways of showing respect to the fire is to offer pure and uncontaminated wood. In this case, the quality of wood is associated with issues of purity.

Moreover, shared norms dictate that the actual quality of wood, combined with the way it is offered and the intentions of giving, matters more than quantity and monetary issues. Like Adarbad, it is the increase in sandalwood prices and its consequences for poorer people that Fariba finds bothersome. "And whoever goes," she explains, "whether rich or poor, it depends on how much you can afford. You can afford just one piece, a single wood of sandalwood also." In other words, the quantity (and by extension the monetary value) of sandalwood is deemed irrelevant. This is a sentiment many respondents share, while it is, at the same time, common to buy more expensive sandalwood when partaking in temple celebrations, such as those occurring on auspicious days.

The expectation of the fires is also taken into consideration in discussions over quantity and quality of wood, here seen from Khosrow's point of view:

It's the basic idea that matters, it's the basic, this thing—attitude of the person—that counts. It's not what you give or how much you give. The fire is as pleased with the poor man giving a small stick of sandalwood as it is with a rich man giving a ton of wood.

In this account, the amount of sandalwood is only of symbolic value, to the fire at least. The value of the gift is claimed to be entirely dependent on the

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31 The legacy of Malinowski, Parry (1986) argues, is that exchanges are primarily seen as dyadic interactions "between self-interested individuals" (454).

Figure 22: Different sizes (and prices) of sandalwood sticks.

intention and the quality of the giver, that is, the mindset of the worshipper upon offering. According to Khosrow, the fire makes no distinction between rich and poor in terms of the quantity of offerings. It is the intention behind the offering and not the act itself that is important in such exchanges. This holds true for Khosrow and many other respondents. Thus, gifts are important "vehicles of intentions" (Van Baal 1976, 170).

Some respondents are more explicit than others regarding the symbolic value of the sandalwood. Amjad calls it "more of a symbolic thing," adding: "So you know you're making an offering to the fire, and in return you're asking for protection and a lot of other things which are there in the *Atash Niyaesh*; so the first paragraph of that says: 'This is what I've come to offer.' And then the second, the latter paragraph: 'For what are you asking in return?'" As noted above, respondents make use of the *Atash Niyaesh* in a number of ways, and in this case Amjad refers to different stanzas to emphasize the reciprocal exchange nature of the interaction where the devotee, in line with the prayer, offers first and the fire, personified, asks what the devotee wishes in return. He elaborates on the rules of this interaction:

It's not a deal like "I'm giving you this, and you're getting this" and all that; so I mean there are people who are today not very well off, so they may come [to the temple] every day in the month, but they cannot afford to put that every day, so that is ok … There is no compulsion or this thing about it. It's up to you, like it's an individual's choice.

Amjad too, like Khosrow, uses the difference between rich and poor to illustrate that the quantity and monetary value does not matter within this specific exchange interaction. The fact that Amjad contrasts the giving of a gift to a deal underlines that it is exactly that—a gift—and not an economic exchange.

A set of data, which somewhat serendipitously cast further light on this subject, was the methodological exercise of "picking relationships."[32] I asked

32 See chapter 1.4.3.

all respondents in the core group to respond to four descriptions of different relationships, two of which are typically exchange interactions: "equality matching" and "market pricing."[33]

Responding to the third relationship description (see footnote below), Dinshaw says, "I mean I at least I don't ask the fire for anything. It takes care of my protection and guidance on its own, so I don't want to tell the fire: 'I give you this and you give me this.'" In other words, balanced reciprocity based on a kind of deal is not, in his opinion, an acceptable way of organizing the interaction between him and the temple fire, neither are petitions for material boons an acceptable way of engaging. Such an attitude, he says, amounts to "bargaining with the fire," whereupon he asserts, "I never ask the fire for anything in exchange." What is important is how the fire offers protection and a sense of guidance, which seems to be detached from a gift exchange structure. Moreover, it is not necessarily the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, but rather whether one is motivated to ask for material things. After bargaining, we turn to trading.

After reading description four aloud, Darius rejects a market price relationship as an acceptable way of organizing the exchange interaction between himself and the temple fire: "There's no trading with the fire," he exclaims, "you're trading with it, I'm giving you a stick, would you do this for me? There's no trading with somebody superior to you!" The different ontological positions between him and the fire and their hierarchical relation make trading an unsuitable model for understanding his relationship with the fire. In both cases, exchange patterns typical of economic exchange models are not considered the proper way to interact with the fires.

Perhaps as expected, and judging by the quotes above, the quantity of offerings is downplayed in favor of the qualitative value of sincere intentions and ethical protocol. Exchanges should not proceed if they include conditions laid down by the worshipper, and expectations should be limited to the hope of a response. Darius' assertion that there can be no trading with a superior entity or person leads us to the next discussion. The following paragraphs address two coexisting models of exchange, focused more on the status of the fire: the "vertical" and the "horizontal" model respectively.

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33 1) You and the fire are one together. Essentially, you are the same: The fire is you and you are the fire. 2) The fire is your superior: You respect and revere it. You follow and obey the fire. The fire guides and protects you. 3) You and the fire keep things evenly matched, one-for-one. What you do for the fire balances what the fire does for you. 4) What you get from the fire is proportional to what you give it. What you receive from the fire depends on the value of the offerings you make to the fire.

3.3.8. Models of exchange: between kings and friends

Peter M. Blau (1964) contends that gift-giving both establishes bonds of friendship and promotes "superordination over others" (89). Gregory Alles (2000) applies this to the context of religion when he claims that "unequal exchange" characterizes interactions with gods and other non-empirical beings (122). Christoph Auffarth (2016, 541) presents a similar conception arguing that such interactions are by default "asymmetrical." In the case of the Parsi Zoroastrians, these assumptions are only partly true because *two* models of exchange are found. The "horizontal" model signifies an exchange between entities of equal status on equal terms, while the "vertical" model implies an exchange where one participant is superior to the other. The *Atash Niyaesh* promotes both.

As per the "vertical" model, the fire is worthy of worship and praise and characterized as "royal" (Sethna 1984, 87). These status elements suggest an exchange based on hierarchical differences between the worshippers and fires. A widely used metaphor corresponding to this model is that between a king (i.e., the fire) and his subordinates (i.e., the worshippers). The "vertical" model is established and reinforced by a set of corresponding ritual actions combined with material symbolism present in the fire temple. The ceremony of placing a fire in the temple is, as seen, called "the enthronement," and the consecrated fire is placed in a fire vase referred to as "the throne."[34] Moreover, the holiest of the consecrated fires in India, the *Atash Behram* fire in Udvada, is called Iranshah, "The King of Iran." The consecrated temple fires, especially *behram* fires, are commonly referred to as *Padshah*s (Pers., "Master King"). Features of material context strengthen the promotion of a kind of hierarchy, i.e., the "vertical" model, such as the fire vase raised to a high level and artifacts surrounding the fire, thus indicating a royal model.

Additionally, a part of the socialization process into the temple setting includes acquiring a set of embodied actions, starting with a purification rite. Another set of actions directed at the fire, such as bowing, kneeling, prostrating, various hand gestures, and actions more indirectly targeting the fire such as touching and/or kissing the marble steps or windows connected to the chamber also play a part in this process of relationship-making. The specific meaning of these actions is not necessarily relevant in everyday talk about the fires—at least not before being brought into focus by the ethnographic outsider.

Embodied actions can take on multiple meanings. In the present case, I argue that the aforementioned actions function as primes *for* relationships and expressions *of* relationships, and they provide an opportunity to showcase

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34 In premodern times, Choksy (2006) writes, "the phrase *takht-e atash* was being employed as a euphemism for the altar on which a fire was said to be *takht-neshast*, 'enthroned'" (329).
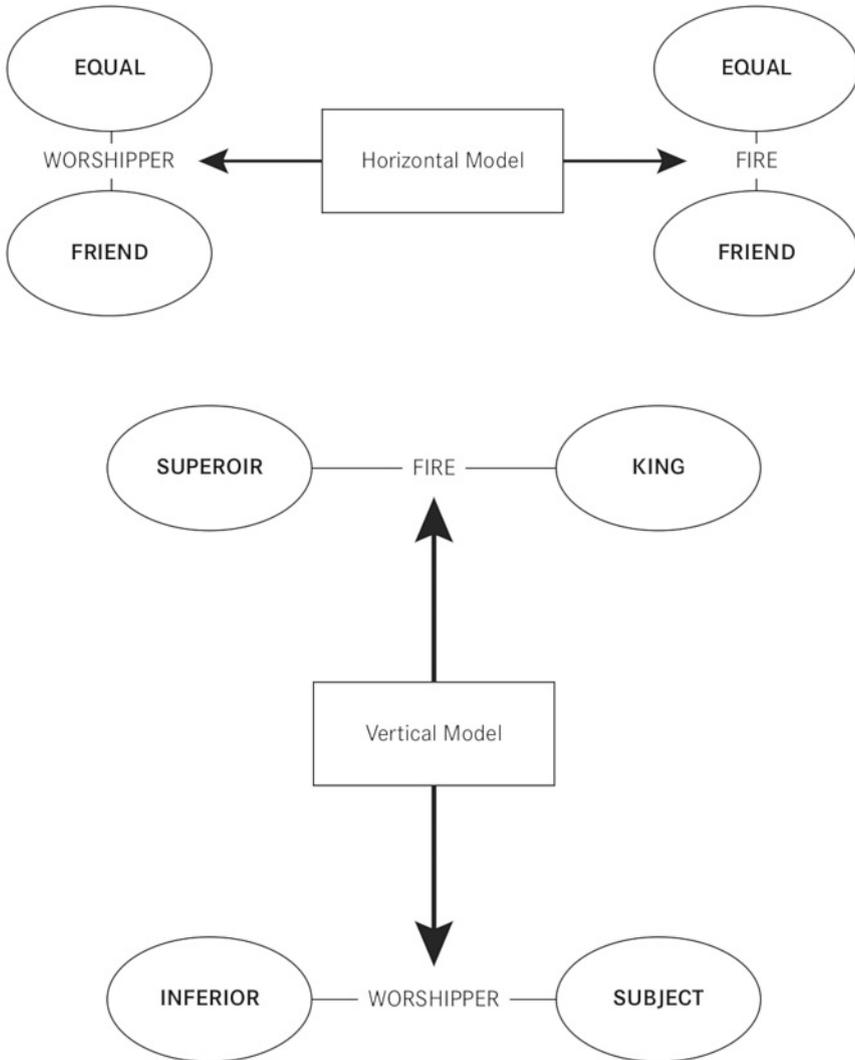
Figure 23: The "vertical" and "horizontal" model of relationships between fires and worshippers.

the status or authority of the fire. Priests and religious experts typically promote the "vertical" model, where corporeal acts such as those mentioned above signal obeisance and submission to the fire as a divine being. One example is found in Boyd and Kotwal (1983), who provide a normative and idealistic rendition of how "orthodox Parsis" *ought* to behave in the temple approaching the fire. A consecrated fire, they write, should be approached respectfully, with "hands held together at chest level, a gesture of respect for

the fire, and head bowed" (Boyd and Kotwal 1983, 302). Actions such as kneeling and bowing aim at showing "submission" in front of the fire and, by extension, to God (303). Interpreted as social signals, such embodied actions also communicate relational intentions such as the willingness to relate and coordinate social action in a certain way (Fiske and Schubert 2012, 173). Based on these royal metaphors and normative assumptions, one might expect that the devotee–fire relationship be considered that of a king and his subjects, i.e., corresponding to the "vertical" model.

Respondents also apply the "horizontal" model, where the exchange interaction is, for many, regarded as friendly, where the key metaphor is interaction between "friends" giving "friendly" gifts. Dinshaw, a retired priest, reinstates but questions the imagined historiographical narrative: "For a period of time, the practice has been [that] when *we* go to the fire we kneel down—just like we used to kneel down in front of the kings in the earlier days." He continues: "So the thing is that the *Atash Niyaesh* says it is not a king, it is your friend, and like physically he expects some gifts from you, which you are bound to carry." In practice, these two models coexist and are triggered according to setting. This is true at least for non-priest respondents who engage in gift exchanges with the fires in a friendly mode (like Darius above) but incorporate acts and gestures such as bowing and kneeling which reveal a perception of the relationship as a hierarchical one. Having discussed exchanges between priests and non-priests and between fires and worshippers, the final part of this section broadens the scope.

3.3.9. Polytropic gifting

During my two stays in Dadar, I walked past a vegetable market by the main entrance of the colony daily. A roadside shrine was located there, containing a representation of Sai Baba of Shirdi (figure 25, right), a popular depiction of Ganesh (figure 25, left), and the quintessential image of Zarathustra, Kay Lohrasp, and the sacrificial fire (figure 25, middle); the latter is an image found in many Parsis' homes. On ordinary days, many people, including Parsis, stopped in front of the wall garlanding, bowing and/or touching *all* three gods/ gurus, rarely stopping only at one of them.

Such conduct is one important characteristic of what Carrithers (2000) calls *polytropy*, a term meant to describe the wider multi-religious and pluralistic landscape of India as well as individual orientations within that landscape. This orientation leads people to relate to many divine beings in their pursuit of relief, sustenance, and general well-being. The logic of polytropy, says Carrithers, is not so much cognitive as "corporeal and intersubjective—people seeking relationships with powerful holy persons" (2000, 856). How does this relate to Parsi Zoroastrianism and interactions with non-Parsis?

Figure 24: A wayside shrine in Dadar Parsi Colony.

"As long as someone gives it with faith."

The correspondences between Iranian and Parsi priests in India in the period between 1478 and 1773 are interesting in light of the question posed above. The *Persian Rivayats* (1932/1999) comprises a large collection of letters from Iranian Zoroastrian priests in reply to questions sent by Parsi, mainly concerning ritual matters (Hinnells 2015a, 159). The topic of inter-religious gift giving was also apparently a concern for Indian priests at the time. While the question asked by the Parsi priests is not stated, the answer is relevant to the present discussion: "If a *darvand* (i.e., one of a foreign faith) gives anything (as a gift) for the Atash Behram, it is allowable if they accept it; and if he gives anything as a gift to the pious (*asho-dad*), that even may be accepted [*sic*]" (Shapur Bharucho's Rivayat 1932, 74).

Requests from members of other religions to offer sandalwood to the temple fires are not uncommon; neither is it out of the ordinary to see followers of other religions performing *puja* in front of fire temples.[35] This particular subject is brought into focus during a group interview with seven female respondents when they discuss how many are under the impression that the Udvada priests discard sandalwood not bought in Udvada. One of them, Dinaz, connects the topic to a discussion of non-Parsis and offerings:

Dinaz: Nowadays there are a lot of non-Parsis—you'll see them outside the fire temple … especially in the town area or even in Udvada and all, who, when you're going in, they will request you, they'll give you sandalwood saying, "Please put it inside for me."
Gulrukh: But our sweeper also does this; many times, she has given—our sweeper over here—many times she has given me [sandalwood].
Dinaz: That is not accepted. I would say: "Give me the money and I'll get the wood."
Bahar: Sweepers are unclean.

35 I base this latter point on my own observations throughout both field trips.

Gulrukh: See, now who cuts wood? Parsis never go to cut wood … Non-Parsis—they only go to the jungle and they cut, so why this [attitude]? That is all, I think, in your mind. I might be different.

Dinaz: I don't know, somehow, I would not take the wood, but I would take the cash.

Shahnaz: Somebody told me that sandalwood has some quality in it which repels negativity.

Gulrukh: Exactly! As long as someone gives it with faith, I think it's ok.

The main discussion point is not whether it is appropriate (or effective) for adherents of other religions to offer sandalwood to the fires, but rather in which manner such a gift should be given. The key point is the degree and danger of possible impurity being transferred from the sandalwood touched by a non-Parsi to the fire. To Shahnaz, sandalwood has a negativity- or impurity-repelling quality in itself; and to Gulrukh the degree of faith, not the non-Parsi status, is what matters. Both Dinaz and Bahar would rather buy the sandalwood themselves.[36] From non-Parsis gifting sandalwood to the fires we turn to Parsis offering gifts to so-called non-Zoroastrian entities.

"Some coins—nothing more!"

As I was sitting one night talking to my Parsi host about his weekend trip with a friend to a summer house outside Mumbai, he remarked—seemingly as an aside—how his friend, also a Parsi, stopped by a Kali roadside shrine on the way there and went inside for a while. My host also did, he affirmed, but, as he framed it, "only to pay my respect and offer some coins—nothing more." I got the impression that my host was somehow trying to assure me that his offering was not substantial (just "some coins"), and that his polytropic orientation was, from his point of view, acceptable, albeit still not fully so from a theological perspective.

A large minority of the respondents expressed in some way or another a polytrophic orientation by relating to so-called non-Zoroastrian divine beings, such as Hindu gods. The distinction many, like Arnaz, draw is between offering and worshipping (i.e., bowing down or revering), and participating by one's sheer presence in religious festivals, which seems to be mostly deemed acceptable.

Kreyenbroek (2001) contends that there is a growing popularity of the so-called "*Baba* cults" among many Parsis, an observation backed up by my findings. Many of my respondents state that they visit shrines or report some kind of affiliation with living or dead *Baba*s—especially Sai Baba of Shirdi, a popular figure in India's religious landscape attracting people from different

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36 As an aside, one might observe that such exchange sequences include yet another mediator in the exchange structure, where non-priests act as mediators between non-Parsis and the temple fires.

religions and different caste backgrounds transgressing religious boundaries (Elison 2014).

Alma, a woman in her fifties, tells me that she "does" Sai Baba of Shirdi like many other of her Parsi friends in her colony do. Her neighbors had repeatedly asked her to come along to pray, but it was not until her father died that she and her mother went: "They were putting *ramni*—a special day for Sai Baba, and we went, and we felt nice, I think." A later visit to Shirdi with her mother is one justification she provides as to why she now asks "for his help a lot—Sai Baba." Interestingly, Alma makes sure to stress that she does so "much less than I would talk to our God, Ahura Mazda, or Zarthust Saheb." In fact, she admits that her relationship with Sai Baba causes her a sense of guilt toward Ahura Mazda, indicating a discrepancy between how she thinks she ought to behave and how she actually behaves—between theory and practice, that is.

This case also exemplifies another key feature of polytropy, according to Carrithers. It covers both the occasional request for a favor from a distant god, the god visited occasionally or on festival occasions, and the god whom one visits daily (Carrithers 2000, 835). Alma's pragmatic solution is to "finish saying all *our* names first, Zarthost Saheb, Ahura Mazda, Muskhel Aasan, and Kukadaru, and then lastly ask his name: 'Sai Baba, help me.'" In this case, her response to her anguish is to practice a case of graded polytropy, where the hierarchically classified divine beings or holy persons identified with Zoroastrianism occupy the main position.

The critics of such polytropic orientations among Parsis are often but not exclusively religious experts. They typically base their (internal) criticism on the material attitude exemplified by such petitionary requests to so-called non-Zoroastrian beings. Adarbad is not in favor: "Apart from holy fire, I have never bowed down before anything and never will." Doing so, he reasons, amounts to "bribing the creator." Adarbad, as many others do, draws the line on corporeal acts such as bowing. Interestingly, the crucial *difference* between the fire and Sai Baba of Shirdi or "Ganpati Baba" is not necessarily based on religious identity but rather related to material versus non-material benefits: "But I tell you something, what you won't get in a fire temple, you'll get it there, [with the] *Ganpati*s and *Sai Baba*s," confirming that he is referring to material goods.

The sentiment in Adarbad's reasoning exemplifies the discussion among many of my respondents about what kind of norms *should* guide people's exchange interactions with the temple fires. Despite couching his critique in an inter-religious comparison, Adarbad's criticism, further corroborated by Arnaz, seems to be more about establishing hierarchy rather than efficacy and maintaining religious boundaries. For example, in contrast to Rustom, Arnaz stresses that she does not ask the fires for material boons or in general for anything at all. The distinction and connection between spiritual and high (i.e., Zoroastrianism and fire worship) on the one hand and material and low (i.e., other religions and *Baba*s) on the other is obvious here.

From the critics, we turn to the purists. Sarosh seems to argue for a similar hierarchy. He labels requests for material boons as "physical goals masquerading as spiritual endeavors." He illustrates his position with a hypothetical conversation between himself, a priest, and a lay visitor to his temple: "'I want a son, I want a son,' *arrey*, so?! Huh?! 'I want a U.S. visa.' These are physical things people come and ask me."[37] There seem to be no limitations in the range of requests that the fire is considered able to fulfill, at least not according to a purist critic. This could be read as a tacit acceptance of polytropic orientations among the Parsis: a recognition that people will do what they do no matter what others say. Because of that, a discourse has developed which tries not to stop such orientations but rather distinguish between Zoroastrianism (i.e., spiritual) and boon worship to *Baba*s (i.e., material); requests from the fires are sometimes placed in the latter category depending on the worshipper's wishes.

"It's Meher Yazad and Sraosha Yazad, for me."

Alma's list and her distinction between Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian divinities also offer the opportunity to discuss respondents' accounts of relationships with other so-called Zoroastrian divinities. Many Parsi Zoroastrians have favorite prayers and favorite divine beings they turn to in times of distress. We have already seen how Feroza has established a relation with the water deity. In addition to the previously mentioned Ava Ardavisur, the source material reveals four other beings as more relevant to my respondents in their everyday lives than others: Zarathustra, Behram Yazad, Sraosha Yazad, and Kukadaru. The cases of Fariba, Behnaz, and Alma will suffice to provide examples.

Known as one of contemporary Parsis' favorite divine beings (Stausberg 2004b), Behram Yazad is associated with victory and success, typically invoked by my respondents when they face difficulties. Sraosha Yazad is another popular divine being. As will be seen below, my respondents often pray to Sraosha before going to bed as he is believed to protect the worshippers against all evil during the night.

Zarathustra is actualized and made relevant in present-day practice in a number of ways. We have already seen how Rustom and many others perceive Zarathustra as the quintessential Zoroastrian and human being. Artistic depictions of Zarathustra adorn both the interior (and exterior) of fire temples and people's homes. These images are garlanded on auspicious days, such as during the "birthday of the prophet" (Pers. *Khordad-Sal*), and engaged with through touching and/or kissing the frame. Some respondents point out that the purpose of such actions is to create an emotional connection with their prophet, while others (e.g., Arnaz) ridicule those very actions stating that

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37 "Arrey" is an Indian utterance expressing surprise or anger and frustration.

Zarathustra cannot be approached and emphasizing that such images are only artistic representations and do not depict the real Zarathustra.

Figure 25: A garlanded image of Zarathustra.

As we will see in the next section, in search for social support, Behnaz turned to her neighborhood temple fire to cope with a stroke. She also relates to other divine beings associated with Zoroastrianism: "I guess I don't know how other people pick and choose, but for me it is what I believe in. I like truth and I like justice, so it's Meher Yazad and Sraosha Yazad for me." Behnaz relates to such beings on the basis of what they represent and apparently not so much what they afford. She continues: "And trust me, many people like Behram Yazad a lot. I, too, like Behram Yazad, but for me Sraosha and Meher have a far greater relevance … I mean I shouldn't be saying this, it's wrong, because I look at all of them equally." As seen in previous examples, respondents either grade divine beings in line with (normative) assumptions, like Alma above, or underline that they should be treated equally, as Behnaz hints here.

Later on, Behnaz explains how she makes Sraosha Yazad relevant to her day-to-day routines: "Sraosha Yazad is the guardian angel to keep us safe and secure when we sleep at night; so every night, I pray to Sraosha Yazad … and I tell Sraosha Yazad to keep a watch over me while I sleep at night and reenergize me so that when I wake up in the morning, I feel new and fresh." Thus, different divine beings perform different functions in different contexts in respondents' day-to-day lives, a facet we also find in Fariba's account. I ask her to elaborate on why Behram Yazad is so important to her: "See, it's like when you have a cough and a cold, you will go to a specialist of cough and cold, and when you have a problem with bones, you go to a bones specialist. It's just like that; Ahura Mazda is our Lord, and there are other saints like—or they are also equal to God. So Behram Yazad is just that, one of the gods; so I pray to this god, Behram Yazad." Fariba's reasoning is also interesting from a classifica-tory perspective in that she first calls Behram Yazad a "saint" and subsequently one of several "gods": "There is a small story that concludes that when you are

having or facing a difficulty in life and then, if you pray to Behram Yazad, then he will guide you and help you out; so that is why Parsis believe in Behram Yazad, and water, and such people as Kukadaru." Here, Fariba is referring to *Mushkel Aasan* (Behram Yazad), a narrative about a poor woodcutter's turn of fortune turned into a ritual event. These examples are instances of the polytropic orientation mentioned above, in that my respondents pursue multiple relationships in their search for solace and support.

In the last quote, Fariba mentions Kukadaru, who is also often mentioned by other respondents. Jamshedji Sorab Kukadaru (1831–1900) was a priest (later a *panthaky*) connected to an *adaran* temple in Mumbai. The picture of Kukadaru hangs on many temple walls. Kukadaru is one of the "most famous priests in Parsi history," being a posthumous ritual healer, said to perform miracles in his day, attributed with spiritual powers such as healing and divination (Stausberg and Karanjia 2008c). Many present-day Parsis have a picture of him in their money pockets or one on the prayer table, especially for "safety" and "protection."

At one point, Alma recaps a story about when she felt that Kukadaru became a source of crucial social support. The story starts when her husband had an accident when she was 25. In the hospital, they discovered that other visitors kept "praying to his [Kukadaru's] photo outside the rooms." Then, she explains, "one day maybe I would think of him, and I felt drawn towards him." She goes on to explain the reasons why she continued to "talk" to Kukadaru:

A: I could relate to him easily just like a living person. They [the other patients] told me about him and all, that he was there, so I felt more at ease. He would understand me, and he's not *that* great higher is what I thought, and I started, and I felt nice inside me.
Me: When you say that you related to him, what do you mean by that?
A: It was easier to talk with him and ask him … I could go and speak out what I had in my mind, which I wouldn't do it to my other friends and make them upset, [saying] that I'm scared for my husband's life, and make my mother upset or my in–laws upset. I could talk to *him* and say, "Now he's getting better, please make him walk a little more now." I would talk to him like that. I'm not very talkative with people, and I don't like much talking—useless talk and all. I like my reading and then all that, the person little bit; so this I could open up more in an honest way … I wouldn't [tell them that] "Oh, I'm just dying with fright and all," which I could tell him [Kukadaru].

Alma's story is relevant for a number of reasons. Concerning the object of relationship, Kukadaru's human characteristics make him, from Alma's point of view, easier to relate to and confide in. This is also underlined by the fact that she perceives him as not "that great higher," indicating that non-human and divine beings are also hierarchically graded. Alma utilizes this new relationship in two ways or for two purposes: She feels more comfortable confiding in Kukadaru than her human peers, partly because she does not want to make them anxious and partly because her "not very talkative"

personality makes the object of relation more suited to begin with. The relationship with Kukadaru provided Alma with a companion whom she could trust with things that she couldn't share with her human friends and offered her a kind of support which she could not get from her human peers without making everybody more anxious.

Upon returning from the hospital, Alma concludes, "No, then it wasn't much after that because we never had a photo in the house of Kukadaru, and I wasn't going much to the *agiary* anyways, so it was just a little 'hi and bye' type of a thing." In other words, the relationship in question was restricted to the hospital whilst trying to cope with her husband's sickness and the lack of people in her immediate social circle she could confide in without making them anxious. The case of Alma is an illustrative example of how flexible such relationships and their non-human relational partners are for many respondents. On the one hand, they can provide meaningful and enduring personal relationships, and on the other hand, they can be drawn on for short periods of time when in need of support or help. That the temple fires can be analyzed as kinds of coping devices is the main topic of the following section.

3.3.10. Concluding discussion: fires in gift exchanges

In this section, I have investigated one fundamental part of the day-to-day activity in Zoroastrian fire temples in India, namely exchanges. By using "exchange" as a theoretical lens, I have explored the interaction between devotees and their temple fires as well as between priests and non-priests. As examples of polytropic orientations, I have also discussed how some Parsis respond to gifts given from non-Parsis to the temple fires as well as how they relate to both so-called non-Zoroastrian and other Zoroastrian deities in their pursuit of divine help and support.

A relational modality characterizes the *boi* ritual in that relations between human and divine beings are based on a gifting model (Palmer 2011). The *boi* ritual and connected practices constitute a kind of reciprocal exchange, where the embodied actions in giving (wood and reciting prayers) and receiving (ash) forces the "gift and counter-gift into the same instant" (Bourdieu 1990, 105). My main assumption is that ritualized exchange sequences guide interaction for respondents in that it frames and coordinates how people relate to fires by making interaction more transparent and predictable. By giving sandalwood and applying the ash, respondents embody the exchanges which in the next step generate but also sustain and strengthen notions of relationships between the worshippers and the fires. Relevant prayers, especially the *Atash Niyaesh*, support ideas about gift giving based on reciprocity and relationships.

However, exchanges and relationships should be treated as associated but distinguishable concepts. One should distinguish between "the *form of the*

exchange from the *type of relationship*" (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005, 888). These variables have an effect on each other: Exchanges can alter the nature of relationships, and relationships can alter the nature of exchanges. Gift exchange is one prevalent way of coordinating with and understanding eventual responses of the fires. For some respondents, such gift exchange only provides the basis for something more elaborate: personal relationships. Series or cycles of exchange interactions, such as those in which many of my respondents take part, have the potential to "generate high-quality relationships … [developing] into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments" (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005, 875). Exchanges between temple fires and some respondents are gradually transformed into personal relationships with one or more fires. Patterns of exchange can and often do remain the main type of interaction, where ingredients of personal relationships such as self-disclosure, emotional attachment, and a relational history develop on the basis of such exchange sequences. In other words, ritualized exchange interactions from childhood onwards become a way of creating notions of relationships which subsequently become ends in themselves. In the fourth section, I discuss the key characteristic of such relationships: the fire's ability to provide social support.

3.4. Coping with fires

> I don't think I'd like to compare it to a human being. I think it's just a cut above the rest; because human beings can err, they can go wrong, and I mean they're very unpredictable, I feel sometimes—most of the human beings. But that fire is just there, you know? It's like rock solid, and it's there for you, whenever you want to bow down before it. I wouldn't trust human beings so much (Yasmin, first interview, 2012).

Notions of relationships are created and molded, I have argued, through participation in cycles of gift exchanges and lay exegeses of religious texts, *Atash Niyaesh* in particular. Patterns of exchange not only structure the ritual enactment of these relationships in the temple, they are also used to make sense of, and sometimes predict, the perceived actions of the fire—or the lack thereof.

Improving personal or familial health and general well-being are prominent themes in many Zoroastrian Parsis' prayers. My respondents interpret

positive (but rarely negative) outcomes of certain events or feelings as help obtained through divine agency, often as responses to specific calls for help expressed through prayers. For some, the source and form of divine agency are not always clear or even relevant, but temple fires are commonly believed to be non-human entities with the ability and willingness to help solve problems and provide boons. Accordingly, a few fires in India have gained a reputation for being more effective helpers than others, thus attracting large crowds of devotees on auspicious days because, as Stausberg (2004b) suggests, many are "in need of 'special' help" (679). The need for such special help, he argues, is a consequence of the somewhat frail living conditions in Mumbai. Another reason for why many turn toward the divine world for help is that support deriving from interhuman relationships is often times thought to be insufficient in coping with different kinds of stressors.

In chapter 1, I operationalized personal relationships by identifying four ingredients involved in relationship-making: the formation of distinct interaction patterns, the establishment of a relational history, personal self-disclosure, and emotional attachment. In this fourth section of chapter 3, I focus on the last two, namely the act of confiding and emotional attachment. More specifically, a prominent theme emerging from the coding was the notion of the fires as sources of social support.

3.4.1. What is social support?

Broadly speaking, *social support* refers to "the function and quality of social relationships" (Schwarzer and Knoll 2007, 244).[38] Most studies collectively referred to as "social support" literature have examined the *effects* of support on physical and mental health, often referred to as "well-being." How people cope with stress has been a particularly prominent topic.[39] *Coping* refers to investing one's own conscious effort to solve "personal and interpersonal problems in order to try to master, minimize, or tolerate stress and conflict" (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, 141).[40] Finally, *stress* is here defined as "any

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38 Social support emerged as a concept in the mid-1970s (Nurullah 2012).

39 Accordingly, Cohen (2004) defines social support as "provision of psychological and material resources *intended to benefit an individual's ability to cope with stress* [my emphasis]" (676).

40 Hupcey (1998) warns that the enormous amount of studies, particularly those on potential benefits of support for general well-being, must be interpreted with caution due to methodological challenges. To begin with, how is "social support" operationalized? Williams, Barclay, and Schmied (2004, 947) identify no less than twenty-five definitions of social support still in use in the literature, ranging from the specific, such as Cohen (2004), to broader and incorporative ones, where even similar theoretical constructs like social integration, or "participation in a broad range of social relationships" (Brissette et al. 2000, 54), are included. Williams, Barclay, and Schmied (2004, 947) argue that the absence of a consensus has resulted in a "lack of consistency and comparability among studies," undermining the validity of the results.

environmental, social, or internal demand which requires the individual to readjust his/her usual behavior patterns" (Holmes and Rahe 1967, in Thoits 1995, 54).

Social support may come from different sources like family, friends, coworkers, groups, or even pets. How religion advances social support provision has been relatively neglected (Nurullah 2012, 182), and those who have dealt with the matter have mainly focused on how religious groups and networks may entail support or how prayers can have coping effects. In this line of thinking, "religious activities, and especially prayers, are usually regarded as positive coping devices" (Hood, Hill, and Spilka 2009, 465). In a critical review, Lee and Newberg (2005) more modestly suggest that there is "something about religion" that provides benefits for well-being. One issue, however, is that when a study does show a positive correlation between religion and increased well-being, it "is not always clear what is responsible for the effect" (Lee and Newberg 2005, 447).

In this analysis, I follow a slightly different—but not mutually exclusive—path. In line with Pargament et al. (1990, 815; see also Luhrmann 2012), I suggest that relationships with gods and other non-human entities can provide comparable social support—in some cases somewhat superior—to other members of the social networks of my respondents. In the following paragraphs, I provide a range of cases which demonstrate how and when non-human entities, in our case the temple fires, can provide *bona fide* social support, covering different kinds of support in different life situations. To enable such an analysis, I define social support broadly as any social-environmental resource construed to be potentially available for participants in their immediate environment—resources that can provide *instrumental*, *emotional*, and *coping* support.

Instrumental support refers to concrete help like "services, financial assistance, and other specific aid or goods" (Taylor 2011, 190; see also Cohen and Wills 1985). Emotional support (or "esteem support") includes experiencing "love and caring, sympathy and understanding, and/or esteem and value" (Thoits 1995, 64).[41] What I have labeled coping support, often called "instrumental" support, is typically linked to the influential stress-buffering perspective in the literature on social support, and refers to "help in defining, understanding, and coping with problematic events" (Cohen and Wills 1985, 313). The boundaries between these types are neither always clear nor watertight, and what kinds of support people expect, want, or need—and from which sources—is context-dependent and not specified by the definition provided above.

Data from the source material presented in the following section will provide qualitative evidence that the temple fires function as kinds of social-

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41 These three types are again referred to as functional support, while *structural* aspects of social support are rather "network structure and density, frequency of interaction, [and] social integration" (Nurullah 2012, 174).

environmental resources which can, for some almost automatically, provide instrumental, emotional, and coping support.

3.4.2. The fires as coping devices

Most studies on religion and social support adopt a stress-buffering perspective, which also yields results when applied to my set of interviews. Below I present excerpts from the interviews with three respondents, Behnaz, Darius, and Nirosha. Their accounts of personal trauma include how they turned to the temple fires in times of stress, in other words a demand requiring the individual to readjust his/her usual behavior patterns. These three cases were chosen to provide qualitative evidence that the temple fires are in fact used as a kind of coping strategy, and that such help is not limited to one type of support.

"It's not instant coffee."

In the literature on stress and coping, life events refer to "acute changes which require major behavioral readjustments within a relatively short period of time" (Thoits 1995, 54). A stroke is one example of a life event where social support has been found to promote psychological adjustment in particular (Robertson and Suinn 1968). In the following vignette, Behnaz retrospectively offers her view of both the immediate aftermath and long-term perspective of suffering a stroke, and of her bond with two different temple fires, which prompted strong and lasting feelings of social support.

I met Behnaz frequently during both field trips in the apartment which she shares with members of her family. During the first interview, she mentioned that she "could handle life" better after she started going to the fire temple frequently during her college days. In response, I asked her whether she felt she had a relationship with this specific *adaran* fire, which prompted her to make a comparison between the fire and human beings:

If I have a problem, I can just run across; I would trust the fire more than trusting another human being … I mean it becomes easier to tell your problems there because you do get a solution; it [just] takes a while. People think solutions come to them instantly. It's not instant coffee, where you just add the coffee to the milk and it gets dissolved!

Unlike human beings, the fires are thought to be always within close reach, and problems become easier to share with the fire as a trustworthy partner, even though the response might not be immediate. Behnaz then describes how she managed to cope with suffering a stroke two decades earlier, an event that changed her life dramatically:

Yeah, when I got my stroke I was in the hospital, [and] the moment I got back, the first thing I did was to go to visit the fire temple; because it was the biggest problem in my life, and I didn't know how to handle it … And I was just going to sit there, and just sit in front of the fire for hours together just like staring at it—[I had] *nothing* in my mind. I mean, why? First, I have to ask the fire: "Why me?" And I know today it's a wrong question to ask why me; he knew why me.

Behnaz declares that her first response was to visit the fire temple with a problem which she felt she was ill-equipped to handle on her own. Nevertheless, she did, in the sense that she knew what to do about it: go to the fire. Later on, she also explains that her misfortune had positive effects on her social life:

I got more interested in my religion after I had my stroke. Generally, people get bitter about it after they get it; I look at it a little differently. The internet was just entering in here when I got my stroke … I started reading more about my religion on the net. And the more I read, the more I got involved in it. The more I got involved in it, the more I was magnetized towards my own fire, the fire in *Iranshah*. Not that I was not deeply magnetized before that, but this helped me to connect much more strongly. I came in touch with the right kind of people. I'm meeting you today thanks to my stroke. Maybe my life would have been different, but then, as I say, *he* knows why something has happened, I don't know it. And when he knows it, it's going to be the right direction. It will be for the best. It can *never* go wrong.

Like Arnaz, Behnaz reports that her interest in religion intensified after experiencing a life-changing event. Her experience with the fire got her in touch with other humans, since the stroke indirectly expanded her human network, but also strengthened her connection with one specific fire. Retrospectively, it seems, she adapted to the situation by visiting the temple and by accepting the outcome as God's plan. In a later interview, I ask Behnaz whether the stroke had implications for her relationship with the fire:

It became more intense because I had absolutely nothing to do, and I needed someone to cling on to, and it was only [to] Ahura Mazda that I could. And that was when I realized that he's the only person who will not betray me. The world will turn its back on me, but he won't. And he did not.

Behnaz's account illustrates characteristics which occur in many respondents' descriptions of their relationships with the temple fires: a high degree of trust, confidence, perceived support, and the quality of the fires as problem-solvers. It also provides insight into some of the generative mechanisms.

   As noted earlier, coping strategies used to approach stressful events refer to behavioral and/or cognitive attempts to manage specific situational demands (Thoits 1995). Behnaz immediately goes to the fire temple to come to terms with the initial feeling of helplessness (a story confirmed by her mother in independent talks).

One should keep in mind that contemporary temples are both religious and social spaces. They are places where people go to worship divine beings and take part in rituals *as well as* to socialize with fellow members of the community. Many, including my host, stop by the temple to meet friends as a part of their everyday routine. Notwithstanding its possible role in the turn of events for Behnaz, particularly in her decision to visit the temple in the first place, a feeling of human communality is not emphasized in her account of the initial stages of her ordeal. It is rather the presence and support from this specific temple fire, located in her neighborhood that Behnaz repeatedly mentions, in addition to the Iranshah fire. For now, suffice it to say that both the social and the religious factor can potentially play a role in augmenting or multiplying the effects of one another in such situations.

In the initial stages of coping with her stroke, Behnaz's strategy can be described as an emotion-focused (or driven) approach directed on the "emotional reactions" accompanying the demands created by the events (Thoits 1995). As time passes, with the support of the temple fire(s), Behnaz changes to a more problem-focused approach by addressing the demand created by events associated with stress, grasping opportunities for social support on the internet (Thoits 1995).

Behnaz's case is consistent with Maton's (1989) assumption that it is especially for individuals confronting traumatic life events that social support from gods might "prove uniquely important" because people usually intensify their "search for explanations" to make sense of the situation during such periods (311).[42]

Behnaz needed, she states, someone to "cling on to" for emotional support, and that someone actually became two fires. Beside coming to terms with or gaining perspective on the whole experience of suffering a stroke, the feeling of receiving social support from the fire seemed to have reinforced the relationship by strengthening her belief that the fire could be trusted as a potential coping resource in the future as well.

"My only recourse was divine help."

Whereas seeking support from the fire was Behnaz's first choice, in Darius' case, it was a last attempt to change his fortunes. I interviewed Darius, an energetic pensioner, twice during my first field trip. In the first interview, he explains that he and his family lived in Hyderabad in a building inside an *agiary* compound. "And that fire," he says, "I was very close [to]; very close to

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42 Pargament et al. (1990) report that in a study of 586 members of Christian denominations, close to eighty percent of the participants "reported that their religion was involved in some way in understanding or dealing with their significant negative event," where a key predictor of outcomes was an individual's relationship with God (814).

in the sense [that] I have great faith in the fire. And there have been a few incidents where I have gone to that fire with tears in my eyes for help. I think I can tell you [more about] this one episode." After telling his family history, who went from rich to poor after losing values in the real-estate market, Darius elaborates on this specific episode, tracing it back to when he was about to finalize his chartered accountancy degree. One day, the manager of the company asked Darius to pay a deposit the following day to sign the final articles, but neither he nor his family could afford it. He returned home from his office feeling dejected. He then went to the fire temple:

So, it was about six thirty or so in the evening. My only recourse was divine help, so I went and sat in front of my *Atash Adaran* and sat there and I said my prayers. When the prayers were over, tears [were] streaming down my face. I didn't know what to do! If I don't give that money next morning, I would not get articles in that company. I was there in front of the fire, I don't know how time passed by; tears were flowing down [from] my eyes.

Darius' account bears resemblance to Behnaz's in that a behavioral adjustment (i.e., visiting the fire temple) followed the initial feeling of helplessness with no identifiable human agent realistically equipped to change the situation, describing the ensuing intense emotional experience as one of being lost in time. After hours in the temple, the priest asked Darius to leave; and home he went, "dejected, depressed, and I didn't have my dinner—I went to sleep." The next morning, ready to "face the music," as he describes it, Darius is contacted by a man who gives him "a check for four thousand rupees." Some years earlier, he explains, he had applied to a charitable trust for a scholarship, and before going to his office he receives this grant—completely unexpectedly: "So I signed an acknowledgment of that four-thousand check, let that man go, and then I ran to my *agiary* [fire], *Atash Saheb*, and thanked him, came home, and again cycled to my office!"[43]

Darius combines an emotion- and problem-focused approach to the situation: trying to meet a pressing demand by pleading with the temple fires for help, and at the same time being overwhelmed by emotions. Like Behnaz, Darius attributes the reversal of his fortunes to the temple fires.

The relation between gift exchange and the provision of divine support becomes apparent in Darius' case. Social exchange theory emphasizes that received support is seen as an exchange process "rather than as a one-way provision of care or assistance" (Uehara 1990, 522).[44] Received support from

43 The charitable trust to which Darius is referring is the Bombay Parsi Panchayat (BPP), originally founded in the 17th century. Since the 20th century, the main mission of the BPP has been to oversee "the distribution of charitable funds" (Palsetia 2007, 102).

44 As such, some scholars have suggested that this perspective can be especially relevant to understand "the negative effects of support" because it creates the obligation to return the favor (Buunk and Hoorens 1992, 451). In other words, "individuals under stress may actively avoid others in order not to find themselves in the uneven position of having to accept help without

the temple fire is not always unconditional and unidirectional. In the second interview, Darius elaborates on why he gives sandalwood:

You need something to keep you alive, you need something to keep you going. What does the fire eat? Tell me, you know more about it now—just a piece of stick … your individual offering … it [the fire] *expects* this from you—it expects from you. Whenever you go to see your father or mother, if you are living separately from them, don't you take with [you] a package of chocolates? Or for your mother, some flowers? Why do you take it, sir? Because you want to appease them, you want them to feel happy. That is the reason we do this.

To conclude, in the cases of Behnaz and Darius, the experience of being supported through divine help in desperate times reinforced the belief that similar support would be available in the future as well.

Chronic strains refer to "persistent or recurrent demands which require readjustments over prolonged periods of time" (Thoits 1995, 54). In the following case, I present Nirosha, who, after experiencing periods of recurrent difficulties, decided to take her concerns to the fire temple.

"In God's house there may be delay, but there's no darkness."

I met Nirosha, a woman in her late sixties, during a temple celebration. I noticed how she seemed particularly eager to interact with me, and I found out that she had a dramatic story to share. As soon as we sit down for the interview, she starts: "Ok, can I give you some incident which took place in my own life? I can tell you like a story? Well, this is true that there was a time in my life, about, say, seven years back, that I was going through a lot of pain." I was soon informed that a string of unfortunate events had happened in the course of a few years. Her son-in–law died from leukemia, she got divorced, and she had to undergo a major operation: "There was no pain, there was no discomfort on my right side, but my left was ninety-five percent blocked, so my brain damage would have been severe." The operation was successful, and the subsequent years went by quietly.

It was her son's health problems that eventually forced her to act because her son "could not even walk even six steps without severe pain in his back." While he was living in Canada at the time, Nirosha brought him back to Mumbai so that a doctor she trusted would treat him. She took her issues to her local fire temple:

knowing when and how they will be able to restore equity" (Buunk and Hoorens 1992, 453). As we will see in a few cases further below, the failure of the fire to reciprocate social support lead to a (temporary) breakdown of the relationship from the perspective of the respondent.

And I was praying to God; I said: "God, I've never told you that I don't have money, I didn't tell you that I don't have a house, I have never complained about *anything*, even about marriage—my divorce. I've never said anything, and I've accepted *whatever* you've sent to me in my life. I think this is the last straw on the camel's back. I will *not* be able to accept it if anything goes wrong with my son."

In contrast to the two other cases, Nirosha is in a way arguing with and almost threatening God in case her son dies. The turnaround came, she believes, during that same visit to the temple: "And a sudden voice, it's like—it was an old song which came into my mind. A Hindi song: 'In God's house, there may be delay, but there's no darkness'; so you will see some light. And, believe it or not, a homeless woman, a woman without money—of course my son's operation [finally] took place." Within four days, her son was sent home. With hindsight, Nirosha interprets the period as a test by God, concluding: "But he is there for you, he wants to, you know—he is always there for you." Similar to Behnaz and Darius, Nirosha's story exemplifies how the lack of initial support can be reversed to reinforce the belief that help and support are always available. This latter point leads us to a discussion over the difference between received and perceived support, and especially between availability and levels of confidence.

3.4.3. Fires and availability

A distinction relevant to the present discussion is that between *perceived* and *received* (or "enacted," "actual") support. Received support is that which an individual receives, while perceived support refers to the belief that different types of support are available at the time of need, providing what the individual needs (Thoits 1995). In all three cases presented above, consecrated temple fires were approached in search of support, and positive outcomes of events and problems were interpreted in the next stage as received support. However, it is not only in periods of high pressure or chronic strains that people seek support from the temple fires.

Stressful events occurring on a daily basis (often called "mini-events" in coping literature) themselves require smaller "behavioral readjustments during the course of a day" (Thoits 1995, 54). Yasmin, a middle-aged anesthesiologist, states that her fire is "always there" for her. She continues: "I just know that I can just go any time up to it and bow my head before it … if I'm kind of upset, or [want to] ask for some help." The availability Yasmin underlines here is further illustrated with an example related to her work as a doctor, showing how these behavioral adjustments function in practice. Such practice, she explains, forces her to make swift decisions in critical situations. Hypothetically, she says, there "could be a very high-risk patient and I wouldn't know what the outcome would be." At that point, she says, "I would kind of just go and bow down before it [the fire] and ask for help or, you know,

request that 'you'll just see me through, like.'" Thus, the fires are also approached and available when confronted with such "mini-events," or stressful situations occurring in the everyday life of respondents. Closely related to coping are the fire's accessibility and availability and the formation of confidence relationships. Yasmin further says:

I don't think I'd like to compare it to a human being. I think it's just a cut above the rest; because human beings can err, they can go wrong, and I mean they're very unpredictable, I feel sometimes—most of the human beings. But that fire is just there, you know? It's like rock solid, and it's there for you, whenever you want to bow down before it. I wouldn't trust human beings so much.

Despite performing similar relational functions, the main difference between human beings and the fires is precisely the availability of support in that they are available when and if needed. As we learned from Behnaz's account, the degree of trustworthiness offered in the relation between the worshipper and the fire is related to availability and contrasted to human unpredictability. Some respondents approach the fires as everything that humans are not: predictable, flawless, solid, and always available for support.

Unlike Yasmin, Fariba likens the closeness experienced in the relationship with the fire to her similar feelings toward her parents. "And he's my caretaker, I feel," she starts, "and just like my parents, I know he's there for me and my family; and of course, I feel that he's there with me all the time." In this case, Fariba uses an analogy to her parents to describe a non-human companion always available and able to make her feel secure: "So it's the closeness with him," she further elaborates, "just like how your parents when you have— when you're happy, when you are in trouble, you talk to your parents." Taken together, these quotes illustrate that while humans and temple fires might differ as partners on other accounts, they are similar in that they provide the same thing: social support in times of need and a confidant with whom they can share both joy and misery.

Connecting data to theory, the perception that emotional support is available, as in the cases above, is associated both with direct benefits to well-being and buffering effects (Wethington and Kessler 1986). Moreover, it appears "to exert stronger effects on mental health than the actual receipt of social support does" (Taylor 2011, 195; see also Wethington and Kessler 1986; Dunkel-Schetter and Bennet 1990). Concerning religion and superhuman beings, Homan (2012) hypothesizes that spiritual support could offer "the ultimate stress-buffering system," precisely because gods are the kinds of beings that may seem to be "always emotionally accessible" (2). As beings willing to relate, always available, with divine agency and will thought to enable them to help solve minor or major problems, the fires become, for some, providers of better or more complete social support.

3.4.4. Fires as confidants

A confidant is a "person to whom one can turn for any and every problem under any circumstances" (Jankowski, Sherman, and Laquidara-Dickinson 1996, 206). Studies indicate that having a confidant is perhaps the most effective social support (Taylor 2011), and the existence of such relational partners is thought to "diminish the impact of life stress and promote well-being [and] decrease vulnerability to disease, emotional distress, and psychological symptoms during crises" (Jankowski, Sherman, and Laquidara-Dickinson 1996, 207). The question is: Can non-human entities become such confidants? Clearly so. One of the most robust themes from the coding was that the fires are turned to as confidants. An element mentioned by all respondents presented so far in this section is the degree of confidence available in the relationship between themselves and the fires. The opportunity to share one's private and innermost thoughts, feelings, and problems to an empathic listener is highlighted by Rustom, Arnaz, and Sarosh in their accounts of their relationship with the temple fires.

During my interview with an elderly couple, Khosrow and Parendi, Khosrow states that he regularly "talks" to the fire, whereupon I ask him what he usually talks about. He replies: "We tell the fire," and Parendi interrupts him exclaiming, "selfish ideas—everyone will have for themselves." Both start laughing. Then Khosrow elaborates that one asks the fire for "boons," "blessings," and "good health." He adds, "you talk to the fire just like you talk to a friend. You tell the fire what is innermost in your heart. If you're in trouble, you tell the fire to help you." The expectation on Khosrow's part is that the fire fulfills the role of an empathic listener.

The problem-solving ability of the fire is sufficiently demonstrated by the quotes above. However, unlike Khosrow, who likens the fire to a friend with regard to confidence, for most this particular trait seems to facilitate the expression of problems and wishes which they cannot or will not share with their human partners, given the constraints of a human dialogue and the somewhat unpredictable reactions of their partners. Rustom "confides" his "deepest thoughts" to his fire; Arnaz's need for a confidant grew after her mother died; and Roshan emphasizes the aspect of sharing openly: "Lesser judgment," she answers when I ask her to compare the relationships, "you feel lesser judged obviously, you feel that you can say anything and everything."

Jamasp also likens the fire to a (human) friend, but human friendships are not characterized by the same openness as relationships with the temple fires: "So it's a different relation," he says, "to a normal friend you cannot tell anything and everything." The fire, Jamasp explains, "is a friend with whom you can converse, you can discuss, you can put forth all your difficulties, and he tries to solve [them]." While the fires are seen as communicative beings,

one would not expect the fires to gossip. Crucially, one can express frustrations with interhuman relationships to the fire as well:

You can sometimes share certain things [with the fire] that a husband cannot share with a wife, or a wife cannot share with a husband … even those such things you can share with the fire—that "I've got difficulty with the wife, please help me," or something like that.

Taken together, the temple fires are perceived as socially supportive companions, always available for help in difficult situations and ready to listen to troublesome and intimate concerns. The fires are not only thought to be empathic and quietly listening companions, but also attributed with divine agency and power to act on the information and solve problems accordingly.

While Jamasp does not explicitly mention trust, the concept is often brought up in connection with confidence. Trust is important in interhuman relationships (Hood, Hill, and Spilka 2009), and crucial in confidant relationships (Lewis and Weigert 1985, 969). Nirosha, presented above, says that going to the fire temple gives her "a big boost" now, and one reason seems to be connected to these two elements: "And I feel great talking because this is one thing: that I go to the fire temple and talk. I know I can trust what I say." The fact that people feel they can trust that their innermost thoughts will stay with the fires, in other words discretion, is arguably one reason why these relationships develop into long-term endeavors instead of short-term interactions.

An emic concept related to trust is faith. Among my respondents, to have faith in something or someone refers to several things, such as showing commitment to Zoroastrianism as opposed to others (i.e., "I have faith in my religion"). In most cases, however, the concept of faith is connected to respondents' ideas about relationships. Having faith in the fires means having trust in their ability to provide necessary help and deliver a kind of relationship which enables people to offload thoughts, feelings, and worries.

From his perspective, Dinshaw's prior work experience enables him to know whether people are lying. This trait becomes relevant in light of a comparison between the fire and human beings. "Fire—I have to look at the fire and I don't have to, you know, think whether he's right or wrong or true or false or lies … I can just relate with the fire straight away." With human beings, on the other hand, it is "either this or that." Distractions (in terms of interpretation of facial expressions, for example), which can make human interaction difficult, do not exist in his relationship with the fire:

So, you know it is only a one-way traffic with the fire, whereas with human beings it is two-way: either it is this or that. The best of the friends sometimes deceives you. Fire does not deceive you; so I have full faith in the fire … I don't have full faith in friends.

One can assume that by "one-way traffic," Dinshaw feels that he does not have to wonder whether or not the fire may have misinterpreted him. Unlike the

fire, even good friends can potentially betray each other. Dinshaw's description of the fire and his relationship with it is but one of many examples of respondents' tendency to idealize traits of the fire and the relationship itself—especially when these are compared to human companions. Dinshaw has "full" faith in the fire, it is "only" a one-way traffic, and the fire categorically "does not" deceive you.

"I've stuck my neck out for the fire."

The provision of social support resembles a double-edged sword. Relational partners are not by default supportive, and fruitless attempts at support or "blatantly unsupportive behavior from others in times of stress are well-documented" (Taylor 2011, 207). A failure to reciprocate can lead to negative reactions and terminations of relationships (Walster, Walster, and Berscheid, 1978; Buunk and Hoorens 1992).

There are (only) a few cases from the source material where my interlocutors express a lack of support from the fires at a time of need. As most other respondents, Adarbad describes "his" temple fire as a socially supportive entity: "No, it stands by me in all my troubles—it's there … it's a special back-up sort of a thing. It's just in the back of my mind that he's there." Later in the same interview (the first of two), Adarbad explains that his emotional connection with the fire has not always been as unequivocal.

The story starts with the death of his brother, which forced Adarbad to be ordained a priest in order to continue the priestly lineage—still in an emotional state about which he felt "totally shattered." After a while, Adarbad left the temple. According to his account, the employees and laypeople at the temple did not like a newcomer with his own ideas taking over: "So it was very, very difficult," he explains, "and ultimately they threw me out [laughing]." That made him feel deceived by his fire: "I felt cheated, that I had done everything—I've stuck my neck out for [the] fire, and he didn't guide me when I needed guidance the most." Adarbad's appeal for emotional support and guidance was ignored.

After going into the details about the aftermath of the experience, Adarbad yet again states: "So I really felt cheated; when I needed guidance the most at that time, I didn't get the guidance. [The] fire has to guide me, I don't depend on humans for guidance—I fight everybody. I didn't get the guidance—that's why I was very upset with the fire," concluding: "I was feeling bitter." At the time of my field trips, Adarbad was involved in a lawsuit related to his expulsion from his temple. The feelings of being betrayed by the fire came in addition to being socially disconnected, seemingly magnifying the negative effects of the situation.

The breakdown of trust and lack of support did not last for too long, however: "Of course, I did question him at that time, asking: 'Why didn't you

guide me when I was not supposed to hand over my charge?' I was very upset. But then it was a passing phase—it's over now; I will never question fire about anything [anymore]." Adarbad perhaps suggests here that time heals all wounds.

3.4.5. Concluding discussion: coping with fires

The provision of social support is "one of the most important social determinants on health behavior" (Reimers et al. 2012, 2). Tanya M. Luhrmann (2012) suggests "some hard evidence" exists that long-term relationships with gods might be "at the heart of what gives religion health-boosting properties" (289). The risks of exaggerating effects are real in relation to this topic, both because the studies linking religion with social support benefits are scarce and not unambiguously positively correlated, and—more importantly to our case—an insufficient amount of studies have actually investigated what role and function non-human entities such as gods can have in these processes. Despite these shortcomings, it is my conviction that the present case study offers qualitative evidence that the temple fires, as non-human entities, function as potent and bona fide resources for social support. Taken together, the findings show that relating to fires can potentially provide beneficial health-related outcomes, especially psychological, despite the fact that there is no human "other" in the interaction.

Importantly, the findings presented so far show how relationships with temple fires provide evidence supporting *both* the "buffering hypothesis" and the "direct effect hypothesis" respectively—two main accounts of the conditions under which social support can be beneficial. As ways of coping, people appeal to the fires in various life events, either critical changes in life requiring major behavioral readjustments within a relatively short period of time (i.e., Behnaz), or chronic strains (i.e., Nirosha), or daily events (i.e., Feroza and Darius) requiring behavioral readjustment on a day-to-day basis. This is in line with the "buffering hypothesis," which suggests that receiving support—as a coping mechanism—is beneficial only in periods of stress (Zimet et al. 1988; Taylor 2011). Besides being utilized for coping, the mere perception of being in an emotionally satisfying and potentially long-lasting relationship with a partner who provides opportunities to confide and offer support when in need can have psychological effects in itself. This is in line with the "direct effect hypothesis," which maintains that "social support is generally beneficial" regardless of life situation (Taylor 2011, 190).[45]

The availability of emotional support appears "to exert stronger effects on mental health than the actual receipt of social support does" (Taylor 2011, 195). Thoits (1995) argues that a wide variety of studies suggests that the most

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45 After decades of research, Taylor (2011) concludes, "evidence for both types of effects has emerged" (190).

powerful predictor of positive physical and mental well-being is whether or not a person has confidants in their social network. Based on the evidence provided in this section of chapter 3, it is reasonable to suggest that respondents' personal relationships with the temple fires can have similar positive health benefits.

Finally, Taylor (2011) asks a pertinent question: "Is social support largely 'outside' in the social environment or 'inside' the person, in the form of abilities to extract support from the environment or construe support as available?" (196) The answer to this question is context-dependent and not even mutually exclusive. The present discussion suggests that human beings have a unique capacity and will to construe support as available, and that such support does not have to be human—or even human-like.

Moreover, the case study at hand possibly casts new light on social support provision itself and contributes by providing a context-sensitive, cross-cultural, and qualitative study, the kind of which is largely nonexistent in the literature on social support (Williams, Barclay, and Schmied 2004; Nurullah 2012).

The social support literature takes interhuman relationships as a relational baseline. The cases presented here demonstrate that relationships with non-human entities such as the Parsi Zoroastrian temple fires are relatively similar, even though the "other" has a different ontological status. In other words, the perception of having a personal relationship with someone matters more than the categorization or status of the relational object. This case study suggests that humans can relate to divine beings just like they relate to other human beings. But what are the main differences between the two relational partners, divine and human? And why do people want (or need) relationships with divine beings when human relationships are already secured and available? The next section provides some possible answers.

3.5. Superhuman relationships with human-like non-humans

Humans employ the same basic cognitive mechanisms when they interact with gods and other non-human entities as they do when they interact with humans (Boyer 1994, 2001; Barrett 2004; Schjoedt et al. 2009). However, interaction does not equal relationships. Repeated interaction can be the source of basic relationships and subsequently lead to personal relationships. Scholars have argued that the *relationships* that humans form with non-human entities such as gods have striking parallels to interhuman ones in that they provide similar benefits (McDonald et al. 2005, 21; Kirkpatrick, Shillito, and Kellas 1999, 520) and have a similar level of complexity, or "all the complexities—all the hopes, evasions, love, fear, denial, projections, misunderstandings, and so on—of relationships between humans" (Orsi 2005, 2; see also Rizzuto 1979). These

assumptions resonate with the findings in this study, showing that there are indeed striking parallels; but my findings also show something else: That such relationships are in many instances thought to be more complete in that they afford superior support resources, amongst other things.

3.5.1. Fires as supplements

In this first part, based on the present case study, I draw on theoretical models to address the question why humans need relationships with non-human entities in the first place. I have identified (and named) three distinguishable theoretical models (or narratives) which attempt to explain why humans seek social and emotional connections with non-human entities.

The "need" model, as the name implies, suggests that a need for belonging characterizes humans; relations with non-human entities push "Darwinian buttons" for social relationships (Turkle 2010, 3). Barbara King (2007) proposes that religion, or what she calls the "religious impulse," (212) arises as the extension of this need beyond the material to the religious sphere. As this model is very general and difficult to operationalize, it is somewhat premature to conclude that the relationships which many Parsi Zoroastrians develop with the temple fires originate as a result of such a general need to relate. At best, the findings presented in this book demonstrate how far-reaching this propensity to relate is. However, they also indicate the relative importance of material, religious, and social contexts in generating such notions of relationships— factors which tend to be overlooked in theoretical accounts that are more focused on deeper psychological needs and drives. The "need" model also ignores in what ways these relationships are connected to interhuman relationships, the idiosyncratic nature of these relationships, and relevant factors and contexts other than psychological ones.

In contrast, the "lack" model suggests that people anthropomorphize the environment and develop emotional connections to compensate for an experienced lack of human connections. Social disconnection, Epley et al. (2008) claim, "induces the motivation to create human-like agents of social support, and social connection reduces that motivation" (119). In other words, the human propensity to relate with non-human entities decreases and increases in proportion to changes in interhuman relations.

Tanya M. Luhrmann (2012, 324) applies this model when she links the resurgence of Christian Evangelical religiosity to how Americans are seemingly "increasingly disconnected from friends, family, and neighbors through both formal and informal structures" (see also Kirkpatrick, Shillito, and Kellas 1999; Bradshaw, Ellison, and Flannelly 2008). A relationship with a god, Luhrmann (2012) argues, can potentially fill the social vacuum and compensate for the social disconnection which loneliness creates due to the special character and properties of the relational being in question: "always

there, always listening, always responsive, and always with you" (324). As an aside, Luhrmann's description of a God "always responsive" is perhaps a bit exaggerated seen in light of her own case study, which provides many examples of when God does *not*, indeed, "talk back." Suffice it to say that the main point remains: Belief in such beings does seem to provide a way out of loneliness, and one might add that many religious groups offer both kinds of relationships within the same social and religious context.

The data in this study shows that social disconnection (e.g., loneliness), or its extreme version, i.e., social isolation, does not play a prominent role in explaining such relationships. Only Dinshaw and Farya, both from the core group of respondents, provide accounts indicating that such social processes were involved in their relational encounters with the fires.

At one point, the head priest of a temple asked Dinshaw if he could, on short notice, take over the daily business of a temple since the attending priest had left unexpectedly. The temple was located in the middle of India. Dinshaw agreed, describing the situation as a "blank platform" for himself, being far away from friends and family.

But the thing is, initially I went to the fire as if I was talking to the fire. I would start, you know, after finishing my prayers—I had nothing else to do! I had no friends. I mean, acquaintances you can say—they used to come and go "How are you?" This and that, but that was not friendship. I would not call that a friendship. So when I talked to the fire, you know, I was talking in my mind only. So that is while, you know, I would wait as if the fire is going to answer me … that out of the amber, if there is a flicker of fire, it would be "Yes." And sometimes I would prolong my questions so much in the hope that the fire would flicker, so as to get the positive answer [laughing]. But slowly and steadily that affinity with the fire, that relationship grew.

In retrospect, Dinshaw links this first period of transition, feeling socially deprived, to the formation of a relationship with that fire—a relationship which developed slowly but steadily. Included in his narrative are also several aspects discussed previously about the distinction between acquaintances based on mere interaction (i.e., basic relationships) and friendships or personal relationships.

Farya was convinced that her relationship with the fires was different from that of other humans, describing her feeling when relating to fire as a kind of "frenzy":

The way I relate to fire is something very different from other people who relate to fire, maybe because I have no best friends, I have not made human beings as best friends from my childhood [onwards]. I suppose maybe that is one of the reasons, I don't know.

Farya's interpretation suggests that social disconnection, or rather the lack of an ability to connect deeply to human beings, plays a part in explaining why she is able to relate to the temple fires. When I ask her later on in the interview

to describe this relationship, she describes a socially supportive being which provides backing superior to that of human beings:

I told you already that when—what do you do when you feel very happy? You like to tell somebody about your happiness. Or what do you do when you're very sad? You want to cry out on somebody's shoulder. I would rather do that to my fire. Yeah! I would rather just immediately disappear and go and sit in the fire temple.

Like Arnaz and Fariba, Farya turns to the temple fires both when feeling low *and* when feeling the urge to share her happiness. "You can say anything and everything without hiding," Farya concludes, "you are open to that, and you know you will get the answer; so I didn't really see the *need* for a best friend or a pet. I never ever felt that, you know?" The temple fire is described here as a superior relational companion and an empathic listener readily available to provide support.

The cases of both Arnaz and Feroza are best seen as borderline cases in this particular discussion. Arnaz invariably complains that her relations within the family are unsatisfying and that she connects better to animals than to humans. At the same time, she has a large social network and appears to be very sociable. It is, instead, the lack of a special *kind* of relationship that makes Arnaz seek emotional connection to the temple fires and Feroza to the water deity. Arnaz's case, then, fits a less rigid version of the "lack" model, suggesting that humans develop emotional connections to non-human entities due to a lack of a kind, in Arnaz's case a motherly relationship, not social connections in general. In the attachment theory of religion, this is called the "compensation hypothesis," where attachment relations are thought to compensate for deficient or lacking caregiver roles (McDonald et al. 2005).

Arnaz's case illustrates the main problem with the rigid version of the so-called "lack" model as a generalist theory in that it overlooks the obvious fact that humans relate with the non-human "not only when lonely but also when comfortably sociable" (Guthrie 1993, 73). In fact, as Horton (1960) contends, "Love and other satisfying communion relationships in our own society have been frequently given up for the more pressing demands of relations with a god" (221). Empirical evidence, such as the findings in this study, challenges those models suggesting that relationships with non-human entities are always secondary to human ones.

The third, i.e., "supplement" model, is more plausible and flexible, suggesting that relations with non-humans do not necessarily arise as a social lack or a need but can develop and function as supplements to interhuman relations. With regard to social support in particular, such relations can "augment or multiply the salutary effects of such [interhuman] bonds on health outcomes" (Bradshaw, Ellison, and Flannelly 2008, 65). In the present case, one such complementary function is that many respondents utilize the fires to disclose issues concerning their human peers and interhuman relations. Hence, the "supplement" model relates better to the findings

presented in this book: The relationships which people form with the consecrated temple fires seemingly function as supplements to the social lives of the respondents. A focus on the individual, often ignored in all three theoretical accounts, is also important. The portraits show that individual contexts in terms of respondents' experiences, life histories, everyday lives, and religious personalities are necessary for understanding why people engage with non-human entities in long-term and meaningful relationships and painting a more complete picture.

The provision of unconditional support from an empathetic and attentive listener is, I have argued, a key to understanding why the fires are turned to with such favor when perceptions of them as sociable beings are in place. In many cases, such relations are construed to provide a kind of unconditional support structure which most respondents are unable to extract from their immediate social environment. In this way, they provide human-like but superhuman benefits in relationships. This combination and in some cases tension between the human-like and the superhuman are a main characteristic of religious beings suggested in the literature. The following paragraphs show how perceptions of the temple fires are characterized by the combination of human-like and superhuman (in addition to distinctively non-human) characteristics and properties. Relationships—not human characteristics—remain the main feature of social functions of the temple fires.

3.5.2. A multimodal approach to perceptions of fires

My approach of investigating aspects of religion as relationships resembles, as earlier indicated, that of anthropologist Robin Horton (1960). Stewart Guthrie (1993) concurs with Horton and concludes that "Religion is a social relationship" (36). However, Guthrie further reasons that by focusing almost exclusively on the relationship as the unit of analysis and less on the *object* of relationships, e.g., gods, Horton underestimates "the power and pervasiveness of humanlike models of the world generally" (1993, 36). The following discussion focuses on processes of attribution related to perceptions of the temple fires as subjects rather than objects in relationships.

With the Greek gods as his prime example, Guthrie (1993) notices that gods are typically represented as human-like both in appearance and behavior. Anthropomorphism, "the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman things and events" (3), generates religious thought and characterizes religion. One question is: Human in what respect and to what extent?

Broadly speaking, there are two ways of approaching this question. A limited perspective takes what *distinguishes* humans from other species and explores to what extent such properties and traits are attributed to non-human entities. For Guthrie (1980), the extension of human-like traits to the non-human consists of crediting the non-human with "a capacity for language (as

do prayer and other linguistic, including some 'ritual,' actions) and for associated symbolic action" (189). From this perspective on religious anthropomorphism, the fires are indeed subject to anthropomorphization as they are perceived as social and communicative beings. However, such a perspective is limited in the sense that it does not cover the whole range of the potentially human-like traits of non-human entities.

A broader perspective investigates the attribution of a range of features, including human-like cognition, biology, psychology, and physical features (Epley et al. 2008, 865)—traits and properties typical of but not exclusive to humans. In the following analysis, I explore attribution processes related to the fires by adopting this broader perspective.

It must be noted that analyzing entities typically associated with religion based solely on models of anthropomorphism risks undermining the "multi-dimensionality" of these beings (Saler 2009, 51). As many scholars of religion hold (e.g., Saler 2000; Riesebrodt 2010), it is their *super*human traits that distinguish religious from non-religious objects. Using superhuman as a lens raises another question, however: superhuman in what respect and to what extent? (Alles 2013, Tandberg 2013)

Attempts to define what counts as "superhuman" in the study of religion have typically centered on how entities associated with religions can do things that humans cannot, possessing powers transcending those of humans. Melford Spiro's (1966) definition of religion continues to be influential in the study of religion. He defines superhuman beings as those "believed to possess power greater than man, who can work good and/or evil on man" (96).[46] On a similar note, Lawson and McCauley (1990) define superhuman properties related to "agents' abilities to *do* things that human participants cannot" (124). In addition to "remarkable powers," Saler (2009, 50) adds "invisibility" and "immortality" to the list of superhuman traits and properties.

The following analysis intends to demonstrate that none of the above features accurately describe the fires as my respondents perceive them. They are not invisible and only potentially immortal; they are attributed with the power (and will) to grant wishes and boons but often in spheres of life where humans can also potentially help. The multimodal approach applied in the following paragraphs shows how a combination and tension of human-like, superhuman, and non-human properties, traits, and features characterize respondents' perceptions of the temple fires as social entities.

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46 Saler (2000) notes that Melford Spiro defines superhuman in such a way as to avoid boundary issues, making it difficult to distinguish between humans and religious entities (136). Guthrie (1980, 182), however, contends that the same definition does not deliver what it promises as superhuman beings are also "subject to being threatened, reviled, or tricked," and perhaps equally importantly, "some human beings, such as magicians, witches, and presidents, may be credited with great and unusual powers while yet being non-religious figures."

3.5.3. From human-likeness to superhuman relationships

Respondents emphasize a kind of physicality when they contrast the fires to Ahura Mazda's invisibility (see discussion below). Nevertheless, the fires are rarely attributed with human-like *physical features* such as eyes, arms, or faces. In this sense, then, the temple fires remain distinctly non-human. As one would expect, ordinary fires, not humans, are the perceptual prototypes when respondents reason and speculate on the nature of the temple fires—a fact which arguably limits the extent of possible human-likeness. At the risk of generalizing, one could argue that perceptions or concepts of invisible beings lend themselves more easily to anthropomorphization processes when there is no obvious physical prototype which may limit one's imagination.

The tension between human and superhuman properties is central to the next issue. Like humans and other living organisms, the fires are accredited with a kind of biological nature. This includes a kind of digestive system and associated states such as being hungry. As we saw earlier, these traits are most clearly articulated when respondents discuss the ritual context surrounding the fires. Analogies to humans are also typical when describing or interpreting rituals and reasoning about the needs of the fires, such as "hungry boy" (Feroza) or "hungry child" (Dinshaw).

Like many other non-human entities such as domesticated animals, the fires' survival depends on humans' continuous nurturance through praise and prayers but most importantly a continuous supply of wood. As a result of their biological status as living entities, the consecrated temple fires are believed to grow and age. What makes them distinctly superhuman in this context is that this aging does not necessary imply decay but often the opposite: The older the fire, the more powerful it is thought to be. Finally, a kind of double nature is embedded in the conception that the fires *can* die but are potentially immortal at the same time—both human-like and superhuman.

Furthermore, temple fires are attributed with a *psychological* life of their own; it may not be as intricate as humans' but is still human-like. Their social needs, such as the demand for love, understanding, and attention, are documented in the portraits. When asked directly, respondents were rarely willing to speculate to what extent the fires are beings with a kind of *sentience.*[47] On the one hand, when prompted to answer questions related to the subject, most respondents often declined to say whether they thought that fires could feel disappointed or happy; one common response was: "How can I know what a fire thinks?" On the other hand, respondents readily described the fires as "happy" and "satisfied" when they are spiritually and materially

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47 One way I investigated whether the fires were attributed with social emotions was by adding the following question in the interview guide: "To what extent would the fires care whether or not you stopped going to the temple and started going to a *Baba* or Hindu god instead?"

nourished. A common notion was that the fires are perceived as superhuman due to their inability to experience *negative* emotions and feelings such as disappointment, anger, jealousy, and so forth. The fires, Khojeste Mistree says, do not have "any emotional hang-ups." Behnaz illustrates it even more clearly: "Because all those feelings of hate, jealousy, and all those other negative feelings are with us human beings, and not in the spiritual world. There they do not know what jealousy is, they don't know what hate is, and they don't know what selfishness is."

Khosrow has another take on this issue. "The fire cannot judge," he says, "but I'm sure the fire must be feeling hurt. Since we consider the fires as living, throbbing entities—they must be having certain feelings which we are sort of unaware of, and which the fire may not even be able to show us." Here, Khosrow takes the perception of fires as living entities as a premise for how they must also have an emotional life of their own. These emotions, however, are not available for human inspection, and in general the psychological lives of the fires remain somewhat hidden for many respondents. The quote also indicates, as suggested above, that this particular issue is not necessarily one to which people usually give much consideration.

A related question turned out to be to what extent the fires are perceived as *moral* beings, i.e., ascribed with a sense of morality, and to what extent humans' actions are subject to the fires' moral scrutiny.[48] Pascal Boyer (2001, 189) argues that entities typical of religions are generally "considered *interested parties* in moral choices and moral judgements" (see also Dennett 2006). While textual connections between ethical conduct and fire abound, a clear pattern emerged among the respondents: The fires are not thought to be overly concerned with moral conduct, especially with regards to human interaction. Only on a few occasions were the fires thought to inflict a feeling of repentance for moral misconduct and to offer advice. The cases of Nirosha and Anahita are two of just a few exceptions.

Nirosha: He does make me feel—makes me realize what I've done is not the correct thing. And sometimes you get answers that, you know, "Lower your prestige in front of this person, and be a little more understanding, be a little more humble and try and understand."
Me: Who's saying that?
Nirosha: I get this feeling from the fire when I go in the morning. "Let this person go … don't go so deep with that person that *you* go in the wrong way too, you know? You may not be able to handle it, so stay away from it. Don't be rude, don't be insulting, don't think you are, 'Oh I'm high in my tee and he's not.' Don't feel, don't have that feeling—that is not correct.'"

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48 To probe for such indications, I asked all respondents: "Would the fire care if you did something wrong to other people?"

The fire here takes an active role to let Nirosha know not only that she is doing something wrong, but also to correct her moral conduct providing guidelines.

When I asked Anahita to what extent the fire in her neighborhood temple would care whether or not she stopped going to the temple, she responded: "Well yeah, I would be put right, I would be put right. Yes, if care is that, you know, fire can't talk to me like you can, but will send me some message in a mystical way. To put me right, yes." While not directly asking a question related to morality decisions, Anahita's response does point to the fact that the fires are attributed, from her perspective, with a sense of what right and wrong conduct is. Anahita is perhaps more specific in that she perceives the response of the fires as "mystical messages" sent from an entity not able to respond directly, at least not like how humans would respond. Similarly, in but one documented case in my sample, the temple fires are perceived as punishing agents.[49] As already noted, they are by and large construed as positive (or neutral) agents.

From morality, we turn to attribution of cognitive characteristics. The temple fires are often ascribed with cognitive abilities such as "perceiving," "listening," and "knowing," despite lacking physical features associated with such abilities. According to Pascal Boyer (2001), another main characteristic of religious entities such as gods, spirits, and ancestors is that they are ascribed with superhuman cognitive abilities: They have immediate access to worshippers' thoughts and intentions—as opposed to humans, who have limited access. In this sense, the fires are credited with markedly superhuman cognitive abilities. Arnaz reasons about this particular trait, saying: "The holy fire knows; I don't have to necessarily verbalize or whatever the word is—[it] knows everything because Ahura Mazda knows everything, so I don't have to act or stand before the fire and sort of tell my tales of war." Other respondents typically formulate their conceptions in a similar way. The fires know immediately, so there is no hiding from them. However, at the same time the fires have limitations: They are typically ascribed with such abilities *only* in the fire temples, where respondents feel that they must be in physical proximity to the fires to be able to interact and relate. Despite being ascribed with superior cognitive abilities, most respondents reason that they must communicate their intentions, thoughts, experiences, and emotions through

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49 During an interview, Dinshaw recollects a story about a college-going priest who repeatedly shortened the prayers he was reciting in the fire chamber during the *boi*. One day, Dinshaw says, "he went inside, offered all the sandalwood and suddenly one of the sandalwood pieces cracked, giving out a spark, and … his robe caught fire!" The priest survived but was severely burned, but only up to the face, according to Dinshaw. Luckily, since he was a priest, he had a priestly attire on, or "spiritual armor" as Dinshaw calls it, wearing a turban *pagri* and the *padan*. That is why his face remained intact. Dinshaw concludes: "Now why I'm telling you this is because these fires are so dangerous—they are beneficial as well as dangerous. If you treat it nicely, it is your friend. If you try to cheat it, it punishes you."

prayers and gifts. Rustom points this out when he describes how he has gone from a silent to a vocal way of expressing his wishes to the fires.

The by now classical experiment of Heider and Simmel (1944) is often cited to show how readily humans attribute purpose, intention, and goal-oriented behavior to non-human things—even something as mundane as moving dots on a screen—characteristics typical of *agents*. In very broad terms, "an agent is a being with the capacity to act, and 'agency' denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity" (Schlosser 2015, 1). Cognitivist theories of religion have made the attribution of agency central to their theoretical narratives of how beliefs in gods and other superhuman beings arise and persist (Barrett 2000, 2004; Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Dennett 2006). However, "agents," and by extension "agency," are conceptualized in a way intimately connected to human agency: beings making things happen based on their beliefs and knowledge about the world, goals, desires, and—most importantly—intentionality (Dennett 2006). More specifically, agency "primarily serves to discriminate between 'happenings' (caused by physical laws) and 'actions' (caused by prior intentions)" (Gell 1998, 17). From this narrow perspective, an agent is "the source, the origin, of causal events, independently of the state of the physical universe" (16).

As we have seen, consecrated temple fires have the capacity to act and the power and will to grant worshippers boons, blessings, and wishes. They listen, and they respond. What distinguishes the fires as agents from the standard view of (human) agency, I argue, is that they rarely act *independently* of worshippers' thoughts, feelings, gifts, or wishes. In other words, the way the fires are thought to exercise agency is often manifested or exercised precisely in the context of social relations with their worshippers.

In contrast to the standard theory of agency, which portrays agents as autonomous, self-reflexive, rational, and intentional beings, i.e., human beings, agents are—from a *relational* perspective—"interdependent, vulnerable, intermittently reflexive, possessors of capacities that can only be practised in joint actions" (Burkitt 2016, 322). Alfred Gell's (1998) theory of how humans perceive art objects is relevant to the present discussion. The kind of agencies attributed to such objects is, from his perspective, "inherently and irreducibly social" (17). Such objects are not "'self-sufficient' agents, but only 'secondary' agents in conjunction with certain specific (human) associates" (17). The concept of agency, Gell (1998) proposes, is relational and context-dependent. Unlike human beings, the fires are ascribed with agency or intentional actions more or less exclusively in the context of relationships and relating. The fires are believed to act according to their own will only as a response to human behaviors and attempts at interaction.

An issue related to agency is superhuman *powers*, often singled out as a distinguishing factor of humans and religious entities. The fires are not attributed with powers which are unambiguously superhuman. In most cases, the benefits which the fires afford, such as peace, calm, strength, guidance, or

boons and blessings, are also potentially things which humans can deliver. The main difference, then, between fires and humans in this context is that the fires are typically turned to for help in spheres where humans are thought to potentially have a *limited* impact, such as improving health and well-being or exam results. This does not make the temple fires superhuman per se. One example is Rustom, who says that he does not turn to the fires in any sphere of life, saying that he would rather turn to the fires for moral support and to human friends for financial support. In his view, the fires also have their limits.

The temple fires are ascribed with relational traits and characteristics which make them distinctly superhuman (Tandberg 2013). The distinction between the human and superhuman becomes apparent in the context of relationships. The social support analysis shows that descriptions emerging from the empirical case evidently fit with an elaborate conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding social relations among humans. The inadequacy of humans in relationships is often emphasized when respondents evaluate their relationships with the fires. Human interaction entails the possibility of misunderstandings, and humans are neither readily available nor sufficiently trustworthy.

The emotional benefits of interhuman relations and relations with the temple fires are, on the one hand, similar and comparable. On the other hand, on the basis of their special characteristics as relational beings, the fires are believed to provide the opportunity for better and more complete relationships with a relational being which offers unconditional support as it is always emotionally available and offers respondents the opportunity to confide in a fully trustworthy and non-judgmental empathic listener who never interrupts. That such relations function as confidant relationships seems to be, for many, the key motivation to establish and sustain them in the first place. The search for more complete relationships is perhaps one key to understanding how and why humans form long-term and meaningful relationships with non-human things and entities in a cultural context where such relational companions are "available" and supported by immediate social structures of respondents, including significant others. In the present case, the temple fires are human-like in that they provide similar benefits, but *super*human in that they can provide superior support and more complete relationships, i.e., superhuman relationships.

How are beliefs and perceptions of the link between the temple fires and Ahura Mazda connected to everyday thought and action? Several respondents, like Arnaz, vary between referring to the holy fires and Ahura Mazda (or God) when discussing their relationship with the former. In light of this, and to put it more bluntly: To whom do my respondents relate?

3.5.4. Relating to whom?

While Ahura Mazda is ascribed with human-like physical properties in some religious texts (see chapter 1), my respondents rarely if ever attribute physical human features to him. Arnaz depicts God as infinite light with no boundaries and physical form. Khosrow's description is even more amorphous; when asked whether the temple fires are an essential element in Zoroastrian temples, he responds: "Then how can you pray to something which doesn't exist, sort of?" He goes on to indicate that it is not a question of ontology but rather a human cognitive shortcoming: "But these six senses are very limited in trying to understand the *real* thing; we cannot understand God with these six senses." How can we interpret Khosrow's statement that God sort of "doesn't exist"?

Khosrow and the majority of my respondents allude to one particular trait of Ahura Mazda when reasoning why the temple fires are required in order for worshippers to relate to the divine world: *invisibility*. This is a so-called "problem" similar to the one congregants of the Vineyard Churches, whom Tanya M. Luhrmann (2012) studied, face: establishing a relationship with an immaterial entity unavailable to the senses (132). The goal of worship in such churches, Luhrmann asserts, is to "build a personal relationship with God through prayer" (133). This is a kind of God who is considered a partner in a "real" social relationship, but at the same time lacks "many features of actual human sociality—no visible body, no responsive face, no spoken voice" (312). Luhrmann hypothesizes that these Christians deal with this "problem" by going through a three-stage learning process (see Luhrmann 2012; Tandberg 2014). She summarizes:

They [congregants] learn to infuse the absent, invisible being with presence by cherry-picking mental events out of their own familiar experience and identifying them as God; they integrate those events into the awareness of a personlike being using 'let's pretend' play; and then … they learn to react emotionally to that being, as if that being were alive in an ordinary way, right now (2012, 131).

The key element in this three-step process is prayer, which is understood as the "only way to create a relationship with God and indeed the only way to reach God at all" (Luhrmann 2012, 133). In these churches, Luhrmann reasons, a set of practices helps congregants learn how to make God real, not only cognitively but also emotionally.

If we apply this thinking to our case, Parsi Zoroastrians face a similar "problem" in their pursuit of "finding" Ahura Mazda and establishing a relationship with an abstract "power" or being which is neither readily available to the senses nor immediately accessible to the self. Instead of making the invisible discernible through pretend play and other faith practices, Parsi Zoroastrians make the already visible personal by attributing a range of features and characteristics to the temple fires which are in most cases

not exclusive to humans. In doing so, they override assumptions not only about human psychology but also about inanimate objects.

From a normative perspective, the fires are only a means to an end: Ahura Mazda is perceived as the ultimate reference point and communication partner. Worshipping the fire is typically believed to originate in a wish to relate to Ahura Mazda, and the fires are thought to "transfer" or "convey" prayers to Ahura Mazda, who responds by sending blessings or answers back to worshippers. Important concepts in the *Ahura Mazda cluster* mentioned above include several concepts pointing in the same direction, referring all to the status of fire as the representation of the supreme (i.e., Ahura Mazda).
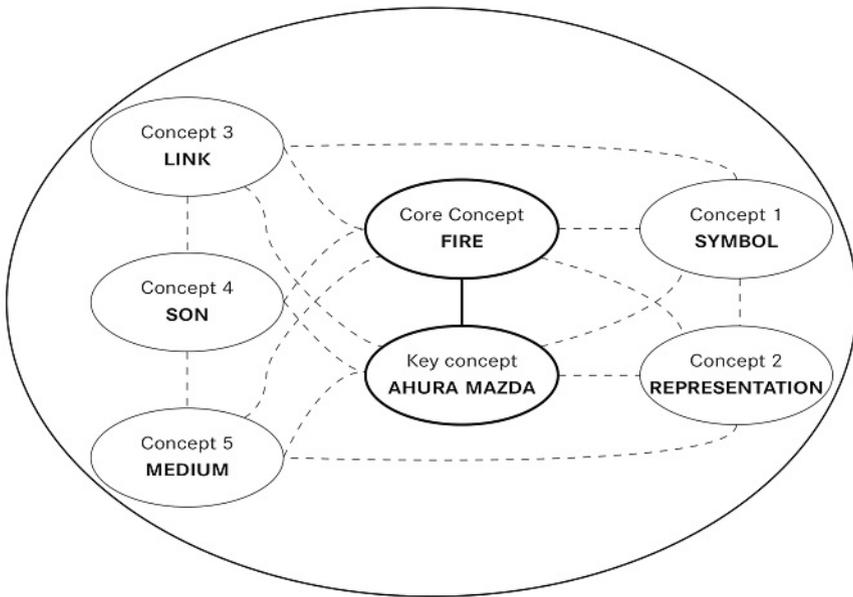
Figure 26: Diagram showing potential connections between concepts in the "Ahura Mazda cluster."

While the relation between the fires and Ahura Mazda, at least in terms of status differences, continues to be a topic of discussion in expert discourses (and in books written by Western scholars), it is a somewhat distant topic to most of my respondents—not only non-priests in their everyday thinking (unless a researcher starts probing into the subject). For contemporary Parsis in Mumbai, the "problem" of the supreme God's invisibility is used to legitimize the fire as a representative of Ahura Mazda. However, sorting out the relation between a temple fire and Ahura Mazda is not important. What is important is that temple fires are (often) perceived as social beings affording social support, sometimes superior to human peers, in more complete

relationships. For contemporary Parsis in Mumbai, the key question is not *what is the fire to Ahura Mazda*, but rather *what is the fire for me?*

3.6. The afterlife of questions

So far, I have discussed how individual, ritual, social, cultural, and material processes and factors all play their part in making the fires targets for relationships. This section takes a critical post-fieldwork look at the data collection and approaches the matter from another angle: a methodological one. Nowadays it is common practice to find self-reflexive accounts in ethnographic studies, where scholars reflect on the ways in which their identities shaped the data they collected. Here I wish to go a step further to ask the pertinent question: How and to what extent did I, the ethnographic outsider, have an impact on respondents' accounts of their relationships?

3.6.1. Introduction: the issue of self-report

The approach of exploring perceptions of the temple fires as participants in relationships brought with it methodological obstacles both before and during fieldwork—challenges which by extension had an impact on the collected data material. In most research on interhuman relationships, the main unit of analysis is a dyad with two human participants known to each other and engaging in face-to-face interaction. Thus, a systematic analysis of interhuman relationships requires data on what *two* participants in repeated interactions do, think, and feel about themselves, about each other, and about their relationship. Moreover, the social worlds of most people include third-party observers as well, in themselves a potentially relevant source for data providing a meta-relational perspective on the relationship in question. Consequentially, research on interhuman relationships can, and often does, triangulate between observations of individuals related to each other, self-reports of the same interaction from both parts, as well as reports from third-party outsiders.[50] The potential sources to data are manifold, calling for methodological flexibility. For several reasons, the present study was from the outset dependent on and somewhat limited by a reliance on self-report methodology.

The main focus in this study was people's perceptions about entities neither approachable nor observable by outsiders. Relationships with the temple fires are, from an outsider's point of view, markedly one-directional affairs.

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50 Based on these observations, studying human relationships bears its own conceptual and methodological complications in that there are many potential sources to data (Hinde 1997, 16).

Consequentially, observational methods, often applied to the study of interhuman interaction (Hinde 1997), were of limited value to the present study. This was further hampered by the fact that I was prevented from observing inside the fire temples, the main place of worship of the fires, where relevant culturally informed practices take place.[51] Moreover, while there are potential third parties involved in people's relationships with the temple fires, such as fellow congregants or members of social networks, their perspectives are also restricted in that they are not based on self-observation but rather on their interpretation of self-reports from the individuals in question. Even though respondents rarely perceive their relationships as particularly sensitive, relating to the fires is a highly private affair. With some illumining exceptions, most respondents do not involve third parties in meta-relational talk. This aspect might come as a consequence of the fact that among the Parsis, worship in the temple is typically seen as a private affair. Despite this tendency, Tanya M. Luhrmann's (1996) assumption that "Zoroastrian prayer in Bombay is a private, hidden activity" (37) needs to be modified based on my findings. Various respondents report that they often recite Avestan prayers in tandem, pray together as a family,[52] or partake in *humbandagi*s (PGuj.), i.e., prayer ceremonies where participants pray together typically whilst holding hands. Several respondents report that they have taken part in such prayers, especially on *Ava Roj, Ava Mahino.* Participation in communal prayer

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51 As noted in chapter 1, a part of the methodological set-up included an investigation of how humans structure and organize their relations with members of their social network which is related to a non-human nature, and whether there are specific types or kinds of relations similar to human ones. The RMt (*Relational Models theory*) was included in the pre-fieldwork preparations as one theoretical angle utilized to explore these topics. The challenge, however, was to operationalize and incorporate such a large and comprehensive theory into a field methodology mainly based on interviews; more specifically, how to define a set of variables based on the theory to measurable units, allowing them to be explored empirically. The RMt constitutes descriptions of types of relationships, but such relations are "played out" when people interact and coordinate socially. Each model has a distinct conformation system (*consyst*) for constituting and communicating such relations based on actions and culturally informed practices. In other words, relational models are enacted or used to coordinate with others, and observational data is important—if not essential. To be of direct use, descriptive versions of these four models were developed, culturally adapted, and introduced to a group of respondents. The results of this exercise were presented earlier in this chapter. The inclusion of such a theoretical framework did not go according to plan, but these descriptions being presented to most of the core-group respondents at least functioned as solicitors for further conversation. Hence, they had a kind of utility nevertheless.

52 Tanaz offers one example:

Tanaz: And also, when I go to Udvada, we go with family; it's nice—it's nice to go with your family, sit, pray with your family, be with your family in front of the fire.
Me: Do you feel that fire is then a part of the family?
Tanaz: You do feel a certain bond between the family members, like when everyone sits together. Everyone prays. It's a very—it's a very feel-good feeling."

ceremonies such as *humbandagi*s seems to be increasing in popularity among the Parsis.[53]

The consequence of the aforementioned factors combined was that the project was dependent on self-report measures. The reliability and thus usefulness of such self-reports is often questioned since people are thought to typically over- or under-report and/or present socially desirable answers to questions (Bryman 2016, 217). In particular, the reliability of people's "verbal information about actions and behaviors is often problematic" (Stausberg 2011, 383). Measures were taken to limit the impact of these challenges such as having several interviews over time with the same respondents to elicit more reliable answers as a result of increased trust and confidence. The general issue addressed in the following paragraphs is how scholars, in different ways and to varying degrees, can become agents in the religious phenomena and processes which we supposedly only observe and then narrate or register.

3.6.2. Modes of interaction between "insiders" and "outsiders" in the study of Zoroastrianism

Scholars of religions—like most other scholars—can willingly or unwillingly become actors in the fields which they are studying, acting as theologians or political actors. Clifford and Marcus' book *Writing Culture* (1986) quickly spurred an academic debate, becoming a reference point in discussions over the many ways in which culture is continuously in the process of construction, and particularly the role that scholars play in producing culture "through the ways they approach, analyze, and write about it" (Fortun 2009, vii).

A crucial reflexive tool for fieldworkers and ethnographic interviewers is attention to one's own impact on whom or whatever one makes the object of study (Tafjord 2006; Musante 2015). In the following discussion, I mainly address when interview questions (and scholarly presence) instigate processes of introspection which apparently lead people to commit to new conceptions, or ideas, or practice—or more articulate (or coherent) versions of old ones—or to discard existing ones altogether.

Such impact demands attention because it challenges the traditional notion that scholars are merely observers, and it is a methodological and research ethical imperative to avoid or at least limit such impact. In the words of Albert de Jong (2008), "For if we, as a community of scholars, are to be inscribed into the history of the religion we believe we are merely documenting, are somehow part of it, some of us at least are studying ourselves or those who taught and

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53 In the following case, Arnaz provides a report from a trip to Udvada, touching upon the subject of communal prayers: "I forgot to mention that when we left from the Iranshah, we had a *humbangadi* on the veranda. That was in the afternoon *gah*. We held our hands together—a short little prayer, by one of the organizers. Nice feeling. Nice feeling!"

inspired us" (200). De Jong (2008) distinguishes between three modes of interaction between scholars and believers in exploring "observable patterns of the impact of scholarly writings on the history of religions on the development of religious ideas and practices" (200): the *parasitic* mode, the *apologetic* mode, and the *reform* mode respectively.

Concerning the Parsis specifically, the scholarly study of Zoroastrianism in all its facets has contributed to shaping religious lay as well as expert discourses and practices—both directly and indirectly.[54] The Parsi case is perhaps particularly interesting due to the early exposure of the community to Western scholarship and—particularly relevant to the present discussion— the narrow boundary between scholars and Parsis in the present-day community owing to the high rate of literacy and educational level of many of its members, among other things (Lüddeckens and Karanjia 2011; Stausberg and Vevaina 2015, 15).

In the *parasitic* mode, scholarly work is actively used "in the development of new religious identities and the re-invention of perceived inherited traditions" (de Jong 2008, 204). In the case of the Parsi Zoroastrians, one example is how the scholarly study of rituals has provided "new interpretations and justifications, raising questions, nourishing doubts, and putting things into historical perspective" in insider discourses (Stausberg 2004a, 55). A clearer example is Khojeste Mistree, who has been advocating a counter-reformist position largely as a result of working under Robert C. Zaehner and especially Mary Boyce, did not take a doctorate, and founded "Zoroastrian studies" in 1977, which constitutes a good case of the academization of religion (see Aukland 2015).[55] Mistree has built a career as a religious persona fusing Western education with a neo-traditionalist identity and a counter-reformist position in contemporary religious discourse. In addition to its negative connotations, the *parasitic* mode is not helpful for my analysis as it is too one-sided.

The second, i.e., *apologetic*, mode refers to cases when academic outsider research has led to "hostile reactions of believers to scholarly works questioning vital elements of their religious traditions and history" (de Jong 2008, 205). "Those who fight us," de Jong contends, "cannot do so without taking over some of our vocabulary and interpretive strategies" (ibid.). A sharply defined "us versus them" attitude is not as relevant in the case of Parsis, and hostile reactions to academic appraisals have not been as prevalent

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54 Vevaina (2015) claims that (Western) scholarly outsiders "are as much actors in making, sha-ping, and defining Zoroastrianism—in the past as well as present—as their insider counter-parts" (22).

55 "Academization" refers to a process where proponents of religion(s) establish institutions and practices modeled on mainstream academia (e.g., providing academic courses with examina-tion and final papers), actively using markers of the same institutions, and creating ties with academic institutions and their scholars (e.g., acting as an important forum for dissemination of Western scholarly literature on Zoroastrianism).

in the case of Zoroastrianism as in many other religious traditions.[56] The fact that many Parsis are mobile in terms of literacy and education, as well as sometimes well-read in the scholarly literature and methodology, has created an environment where negative misinterpretations are less likely to occur. On the other side of the equation, Western scholars have through their writings often slipped into the role of theologians or apologetics (Stausberg and Vevaina 2015, 16).

A contemporary rejection of Western-based scholarship and methodology is demonstrated in some of my interviews with leading Khshnoom figures. At the end of my longer interview with Sarosh (see chapter 2.4), he claims that Zoroastrianism has been "very falsely portrayed" by Western scholars and their "materialistic" methodology. He makes the philological study of religion the main target of his criticism as it is leading to a "preponderance of papers which nobody else reads." At the end of his long outburst, after claiming that 200 translations of the *Gatha*s exist, he concludes: "I mean after two hundred years of Western scholarship, what do we have? We don't have a single translation which is [worth] the paper it is printed on." The reputation of Western scholars—at least historians and philologists—is not always positive and accommodating; the anthropologically and sociologically oriented projects are, in general, more positively received.[57]

The third, i.e., *reform* mode exists when believers use, consciously or not, "the findings of scholarly outsiders to advocate a change in their own tradition" (de Jong 2008, 206). The case of Martin Haug (1827–1876), a German Indologist, is perhaps the most unambiguous example of such an impact in the context of Parsi Zoroastrianism. In the middle of the 19th century, Haug found that the *Gatha*s (five songs, or hymns) were written in a more archaic dialect than the rest of the Yasna corpus and hypothesized that those songs were the only sections which could be attributed to Zarathustra himself. This hypothesis fell on fertile ground in the Parsi community, which at that time experienced what de Jong (2008, 207) describes as a "spirit of uncertainty" over the role of identity, beliefs, and rituals. Now, de Jong claims, there are few Parsis in the community who will "reject the notion that the *Gatha*s are different from the rest of the Avesta, and none would still espouse the pre-British orthodoxy that the whole of the Avesta *and* its commentaries belonged to the Revelation Zarathustra brought on earth" (2008, 207). This is arguably not the case, and de Jong's assumptions should probably be moderated in light of the case of Khshnoomism (see Hinnells 2015a, 169).

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56 The scholar of religion Paul B. Courtright comes to mind. Courtright wrote the article "Studying Religion in an Age of Terror" (2004) as a response to receiving death threats in the aftermath of the publication of his 1985 book; *Ganesa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings* (see McCutcheon 2006 for discussion).

57 Reactions to Tanya M. Luhrmann's book *The Good Parsi* (1996) by some segments in the community seem to be the exception rather than the rule.

By aligning a scholar of religion with a historian of religion, de Jong excludes more sociologically and anthropologically oriented projects. By limiting his approach to the impact of scholarly *writings* only briefly mentioning "the impact of the fieldworker's presence in the community during the fieldwork" (2008, 197), he seemingly suggests that the issue is only relevant in anthropology. In recent decades, however, the study of Zoroastrianism has witnessed the birth of several studies focusing on the non-textual study of the so-called "living" Zoroastrianism, where the present project also situates itself (e.g., Kreyenbroek 2001; Walthert 2010; Ringer 2011). A characteristic of such projects is the close interaction between "insiders" and "outsiders." Two new modes can be added to the Parsi case: the *cooperative* mode, which is characteristic of the academic study of Zoroastrianism; and the *co–creative* mode, which is more relevant to this project and its methodology.

Regarding the first, i.e., *cooperative* mode, the controversy of the calendar during the 18th and 19th centuries saw an increase in scholarly interest in ancient Iranian texts and history among the Zoroastrians in India. Abraham H. Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) was the first European scholar to travel to India in order to provide ethnographic details of the local Zoroastrians (Stausberg 1998; Stausberg and Vevaina 2015, 13).[58] Since the mid-19th century, academically inclined Zoroastrians left India to pursue Western education. Hinnells (2015b) suggests that this tendency came about as a (counter-) reaction to increased pressure from the outside on the community and its religion, instigated by the Christian missionary John Wilson.

The case of Kharshedji R. Cama (1831–1909) exemplifies how such an impact, especially in terms of language skills and methodological tools (e.g., philology), was played out in internal religious discourses. When Cama, who started this educational tourism, returned to India, he started teaching fellow Parsis "Avestan and Pahlavi in Western style so that they could refute missionary attacks on Zoroastrianism" (Palsetia 2001, 163–164, in Hinnells 2015a, 167).

Dastur Dhalla (see footnote below) was the first of a series of priests who later became known as "scholar-priests." Not all of them traveled to the West like Dhalla, but many became affiliated with Western scholarship in other ways, such as becoming useful resources for a number of visiting scholars— myself included—and collaborating directly with Western scholars of

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58 A later example is Dastur M. N. Dhalla (1875–1956). Dhalla was the first Zoroastrian to receive a doctorate in Iranian studies from a Western university (i.e., Columbia). The experience was transformative for Dhalla, offering him a perspective subsequently used to advocate change from within. Dhalla, termed the "most famous Zoroastrian theologian" of the 20th century (Stausberg and Vevaina 2015, 13), reflects in an often-quoted passage on what became a formative period in his religious career: "In 1905 I had set foot on American soil as an orthodox. Now in 1909 I was leaving the shores of the new World as a reformist" (Dhalla 1975, 158, cited in Hinnells 2007, 263).

Zoroastrianism by co-authoring articles and books. While such "scholar-priests" constitute a waning phenomenon (Stausberg and Vevaina 2015), the *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism* (2015) reflects such ongoing collaborations. The latest addition to scholarly literature on Zoroastrianism, the multi-contributor book *The Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History and Tradition* (ed. Williams et al. 2016), also reflects the permeable line between the so-called "inside" and "outside" in the academic study of Zoroastrianism.[59]

Michael Stausberg (2004a) adds that such outsider and insider interaction is always a complex two-way process. Such collaborations demonstrate the historically close ties between Western-based and academically inclined Zoroastrians, several of whom have obtained degrees in the West. In addition to crucial language competence (i.e., doctorate in Iranian philology), a characteristic of such collaborative relationships is that the so-called "insider" often has intimate knowledge about priestly rituals, a preoccupation of the early and contemporary scholarship on Zoroastrianism, along with access to source materials and relevant networks.

The second, i.e., *co–creative* mode, is sometimes an extension (or side-effect) of the *cooperative* mode of interaction. Scholar of religion Dorothea Lüddeckens (2011) provides reflections on such collaborative relationships, exemplified by the following statement, where she explains that some of co-author Ramiyar Karanjia's reflections "owe their origin to analytical questioning" by herself (19). Relevant to the present discussion, she notes that this "raises the issue of the ways in which scholarly work changes the field or even generates its data itself" (19). Vevaina (2016) provides the first attempt to critically examine how the so-called "insider" in such "outsider-insider communication" influences the "outsider," for example through impact on research agendas, interests, and the development of new ideas. Regardless, in the post-analysis of the interviews, I registered cases which serve as examples of the implications of this *co–creation* mode (despite it being somewhat unintended): religious change at the level of the individual in direct response to interactions with me as an ethnographic observer. The critical post-analysis of the interviews showed that, I, as the ethnographic interviewer, had a somewhat discernible impact on (at least) some of my respondents' answers and self-perceptions.

59 In the article "No One Stands Nowhere: Knowledge, Power and Positionality across the Insider-Outsider Divide in the Study of Zoroastrianism" (2016), Yuhan S-D. Vevaina suggests a four-fold typology based on the different positions scholars of Zoroastrianism have: the "full insider," the "full outsider," the "embedded outsider," and the "critical insider."

3.6.3. Co–creating relationships?

Early on during my first field trip, it became evident that the interview guide included questions, topics, and themes which respondents had not considered before. Based on many reactions, one type of questions, namely the "why" questions, was especially challenging for many respondents to address immediately. Asking the *reasons* why my respondents visited the fire temple was generally deemed unproblematic. On the other hand, questions such as why they bowed down in front of the fire, i.e., asking for attributed *meanings*, was comparatively more difficult. One example is Navaz, a graphic designer by profession, in her late twenties when I first met her. After answering affirmatively that she bows down in front of the fire, the "why" question led to a reaction illustrative of many similar responses from other respondents:

Yeah, I never thought about it! It's again something that … I have been taught to do since when I was a kid. Even if I think about it now, I think it's just a form of paying respect … I've gone there since when I was a kid, and that's something I have been shown and said: "You have to bow down; now you look at the fire, now you bow down."

Besides nicely illustrating how scholarly agendas lead to somewhat awkward interview situations, the quote demonstrates the important role of social-ization processes from childhood onwards, where attributed meanings are typically not considered as important as the actions themselves. More importantly for the present discussion, Navaz's answer illuminates how respondents, upon familiarizing themselves with questions on which they had not reflected before, engaged in a sort of immediate meaning-making (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994), for example by forcing through such attributed meanings.

  Another example is Behnaz, who admits that the way the interviews were set up, investigating personal conceptions, experiences, and thoughts, had an impact on her:

Behnaz: I had never done this introspection before, but now after you've told me and asked me so much, I realized that this is what I really am.
Me: So you haven't reflected on your relationship with the fire before we talked?
Behnaz: No, not really—but I suddenly realized that, yes, I have all this. It all was there with me, but I've never reflected upon it.
Me: When you say "this," what do you mean?
Behnaz: This? As in whatever I've told you about my relationship and bonding with the fire, the emotions that I have for the fire.

Like Behnaz, Arnaz also indicated that the "why" question had not previously been relevant to her day-to-day religious life: "There are quite a few questions, you know, which you have asked, and I've been thinking over them, and I

thought to myself *ki* really, really—sixty-three odd years of my life, and I never thought on those lines. What is my relationship to the fire?' 'Why' kind of a thing." Lüddeckens (2011) suggests that respondents' perceptions "will change once they are asked about it and begin to reflect about why they act and how they act" (17). While it is premature to conclude that the responses and reflections on behalf of the respondents resulted in a lasting change (change, however, is often relative), I would claim that reflections involve moving non-reflective (first-order) intuitions to the level of (second-order) reflective utterances and speculations.

One could argue that Behnaz's response indicates that she had pre-existing emotions, but that the questions, and perhaps the introduction of an analytical vocabulary, gave her the means to discuss or make sense of these feelings. Thus, the interview questions could also be said to impart a kind of vocabulary to the respondents. Concerning the latter point, the relational approach employed during data collection was designed to cover a range of issues but focused particularly on if, when, and how respondents used a socio-relational language to conceptualize and make sense of the consecrated temple fires. In quite a few cases, such language was already in use by the respondent, but during the coding phase I paid attention to whether or not people objected to the inclusion of such vocabulary into the conversation and perhaps felt that it was completely alien to their way of thinking.

One way of investigating to what extent analytical concepts brought to the table by the interviewer are adopted is to keep track of when they are introduced during the interview. I consciously introduced concepts such as "relating" or "relationships" late in the first interview with all respondents so that they would not influence their answers earlier. In several cases, "relating" with fires and notions of having "a relationship" (or other connected concepts such as "attachment") had already been in use among several respondents, like Arnaz. Others, like Rustom, seemingly adopted and started using the concepts subsequently. This does not imply that they were alien to him, but the fact that he did not introduce them himself indicates that he probably did not use them very actively or consider them fit in the context of talking to me. It may be that it was not a new addition to his language, but that I triggered the use of terms he for some reason had not used thus far in the interview. The only way to check this is simply to ask again. In the following section, I present two cases from the source material which provide evidence of religious micro-change as the result of interview questions. The former case (Arnaz) provides evidence of change at the conceptual level and the latter (Rustom) at the level of behavior.

Case 1: Arnaz

As expected, the respondents mostly judged relations and distinctions between the temple fires and Ahura Mazda as a theological question

pertaining to an expert discourse. In many cases, prompts to elaborate on the relation led to standardized phrases such as "fire is the son of Ahura Mazda" and "fire is only a representation of Ahura Mazda." As such, these questions accidentally provided good examples for investigating changes in terms of the emergence of more elaborate or coherent conceptions since for most respondents they were not at first as elaborate or coherent.

As already described, one distinctive feature in the first interview is how Arnaz keeps switching from talking about the fire to talking about Ahura Mazda (or God). Moreover, as the interview progresses, Arnaz expresses a clearer ontological distinction between the two, while toward the end of the interview she eventually admits that she cannot distinguish between them. In other words, within the same (first) interview, Arnaz oscillates between different positions.

In the second interview, I point out to Arnaz that she often switches instantaneously from "fire" to "Ahura Mazda" and ask her if she is aware of the fact. She explains that she started reflecting on the issue since the last time we met and has come "a little prepared." Now, she says, "I look upon it in *another* way, as my *link* between the physical and metaphysical—to me it's that link." A temple visit creates a (necessary) connection to Ahura Mazda, a role which the fire fulfills. Another development since the first interview is how she establishes more clearly that Ahura Mazda is the ultimate reference point (or end) for her, and the fires are the means to get there:

But that's when I sit in the *agiary*, so I am talking to the holy fire. But the holy fire is the link; I'm talking to God, and God sends his answers to the holy fire. And the answers are what work out in my life. I tell God, yeah, I tell God—yes, I am talking to God actually, through the holy fires. But I need to sit before the holy fire.

Arnaz's portrait illustrates how probes into discussions typical of expert discourses can lead to a greater awareness of a topic which constitutes a theological puzzle for many—especially for priests. During my second field trip, one and a half years later, Arnaz reiterated during the first interview that Ahura Mazda was (or rather, had become) the ultimate relational end point: "Yes, very clearly so. Though I see a physical fire, I offer this wood to the fire, but I mean I'm not praying before a fire as maybe the Hindus would pray before a statue and believe it's their god."

The case of Arnaz illustrates how having frequent interviews over time is potentially fruitful for discovering how religious ideas, or more specifically the relation between religious concepts, fluctuate and change over time. At the same time, it exemplifies that this study's methodology and the way the interviews were executed clearly acted as a catalyst of these very changes.

At a certain point, Arnaz herself reflects on the interview process as a whole, concluding: "I've been really deeply thinking over it, you know? I was doing all this very automatically—mechanically; then I said: 'Ok, these are the questions you've asked, so let's see how I feel about it." What she did before

in a non-reflective manner has now turned into something approached in a more conscious and reflective manner. While this case arguably showcases religious micro-change at the conceptual level, it is harder to determine whether the same changes have had a subsequent effect on religious practice as well—unlike in Rustom's case, to which I now turn.

Case 2: Rustom

At the beginning of the second interview with Rustom, I start by asking whether he has been thinking about anything related to what we had talked about during the first interview. Laughingly, Rustom explains how he "kind of got thinking in terms of the questions," referring especially to one query related to whether he "communicates" with the fires. He says:

So, I thought it was a valid question, and probably I'm gonna be talking a lot more than what I am. So mentally you keep thinking, but when you think mentally but not necessarily talk [pause]. So I'm hoping that I can now talk, ehm, a little more with the fire. And not just, you know, expect him to know what I'm thinking.

While indicating that he already, to a certain extent, "talks" to the fire, he also specifies that he is motivated to do so more often in future interaction sequences with the fire. Furthermore, we can see not only that the question has led to a process of self-reflection (and evaluation), but also that Rustom partly questions the intuitive expectation that the fire has immediate access to the mind of the worshipper. Later on, he elaborates on that intuition:

Normally, when you're in front of the fire, you're not talking to the fire, right? Because you don't expect a response back, and you subconsciously expect that the fire— whatever you're thinking, the fire is hearing you for the same.

When I asked Rustom whether he had visited the fire temple earlier that day, talking to the fire aloud, he answered: "I didn't talk-talk, but I in my [pause] … Yes, actually I did! I very softly spoke to the fire, and I just again requested him to continue to grant me, you know, knowledge." Rustom's initial hesitation complicates the interpretation, but it is clear that here he reports on changing his temple practice.

   Later on, in the same interview, I ask him why he has decided to start voicing his concerns aloud: "So frankly I'm not too sure how often I'll be … doing that, but I'll make an attempt. If I feel it's working, fine! Or I go back to my ordinary process of just talking to God through my mind." He goes on to say that whenever "there are one or two things I feel I should talk to [the fire about], because I want to hear … that I've said it, then I'll do that." In addition to emphasizing that the change is potentially temporary, Rustom also implies that stating his concerns loudly is directed not only to the recipient but also to himself.

In Rustom's case, it was one specific question that lead to the process of modifying his usual routine from "thinking," reminiscent of a kind of "telepathy," to "talking" as a means of communicating with the temple fire. Moreover, the question also seemingly made him doubt his somewhat intuitive expectation that the fire could read his mind, thereby indicating a change at the level of beliefs as well.

Thus, in both cases presented here (i.e., Arnaz and Rustom), the question(s) posed apparently acted as a catalyst of different types of introspective and reflective thought processes. The main difference between the two cases is that with Rustom, the catalyst was one specific question and the outcome was a modification in practice, in contrast to Arnaz's case, where the change materialized through continued questioning (and primed awareness) and rather concerned the connection between two religious beings (or concepts).

One complicating issue in both cases, perhaps especially regarding Rustom, is that the self-report bias means that one cannot know for certain whether the development indeed constituted a change as a result of the questions rather than a post-rationalization of something that was already in place. What the two examples do show is that field interviews, especially when they extend over time, can turn out to be meaning-making enterprises—a kind of meaning which is co–created in the conversation between the interviewees (i.e., my respondents) and the interviewer (i.e., myself).

3.6.4. Analysis: interviews as meaning-making

With regard to interview methodology, epistemological discussions concerning the impact of reactivity[60] relate to whether "knowledge is actually collected—and created—in the interview situation and in subsequent interpretation" (Bremborg 2011, 311). The positivistic approach, Bremborg maintains, perceives knowledge "as given, waiting to be discovered," while the postmodern approach regards knowledge in particular as "constructed, achieving meaning through relations" (ibid.). The methodological issue of concern here is whether, and to what extent, the interviewer is co-creating the information which, in the next step, is interpreted and represented as "data" or "evidence." While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage critically with such epistemological discussions, another relevant focus stemming from the postmodern approach is how it has brought into focus the interviewer as a person, where the interviewer's "background, pre-understanding and personality are all seen as having significance for the result" (Bremborg 2011, 311).[61]

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60 Reactivity refers to a situation when the subject of study "is affected either by the instruments of the study [e.g., interviews] or the individuals conducting the study in a way that changes whatever is being measured" (Gibb 2011, 695).

61 I have several examples of this occurrence from my field trips. One of them was how res-

Several components of this project's methodology contributed to the fact that many interviews developed into kinds of meaning-making processes in the sense that respondents were asked questions which they reportedly had never encountered before. The person-centered focus and the semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that questions were centered on personal matters and perspectives. The nature of the interviews allowed for private concerns to be shared (this was indeed explicitly encouraged), where the respondent her/himself played an important part in doing so. The fact that several respondents were interviewed repeatedly over time means that they could and did frequently revisit earlier points. Out of such continued interaction grow coherent life stories and narratives which are not merely reported but also construed, refined, and contested in the process and as a result of the interaction itself.

The cases of Arnaz and Rustom indicate the potentially transformative nature of semi-structured and person-focused interviews, especially repeated ones. Furthermore, they demonstrate that a key element in such meaning-making processes can be the introduction of new concepts and ideas which are subsequently adopted and elaborated on during the interview process. One way of tackling this issue is to critically evaluate the material post-fieldwork and try to detect such impact, and in the next step incorporate it in the analysis itself, as detailed in the present chapter.

So far, I have focused on the role of the researcher in such meaning-making processes, but what about the respondent her/himself? A methodological question in all cases and at all levels of religious change is the causality of the relationship. The position often taken that one can, and indeed should, strive to limit the agency of the scholar in such internal processes ignores one equally important agent: the respondent her/himself. The autonomy and agency of the respondent her/himself in the same processes should not be underestimated. As such, the unfortunate consequence of the methodological ideal of neutral observers and documenters is that it partly disempowers the respondent by imagining that such impact can indeed be limited, or at least suggests that such a position is largely down to the researcher and not the researched, amounting

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pondents, in trying to make their thoughts, practices, and experiences intelligible to me (and themselves), often drew on what they assumed to be my religious identity: a Christian. While I often denied such assumptions explaining that I do not consider myself a Christian, these corrections did not fall on fertile ground since most respondents took it for granted that my parents were Christians, and by extension I was one as well. These attempts were either direct, in the sense of explicitly labeling me, or more indirect, by assuming my background in their attempts to make parts of their religion (more) intelligible. Consequently, in several interviews, comparisons were often connected to Christianity, typically by directly pointing to my presumed identity. Darius, whom I met twice, illustrates this point. When elaborating on the *Patet Pashemani* prayer, he states: "This is the prayer for asking for forgiveness. We ask for forgiveness for what? For any wrong I have done. Like you Christians, you'll ask for confession—you believe that by going and giving confession your sins are all washed off, right?"

to a question of research ethics. Relating this issue to the present case, a key factor is how many of my respondents perceived the interviews as a potential *resource* for personal development and thought.

Arnaz and Rustom, curious, self-aware, and self-reflexive individuals, came, as one would expect, to the interviews motivated by their own agendas and expectations. In a somewhat illuminating side remark, Rustom states that the question to which he responded was "a valid" one, perhaps indicating that he considered it not only a question worthy of a response but also a possible starting point for self-reflection.

I have identified three main reasons why my respondents agreed to participate in the study. Firstly, the opportunity to share personal experiences and ideas with an outsider was one of the most commonly stated reasons. This is perhaps not surprising as this possibility, or even expectation, was emphasized by me both upon recruiting people and right before the interview started. For example, I met Nirosha during a temple celebration, and she seemed eager to be interviewed. I later found out that she had a dramatic story to share, and as soon as we were seated, she started: "Ok, can I give you some incident which took place in my own life? I can tell you like a story?" (see chapter 3.4.2 for her story).

Secondly, some respondents told me that they were motivated to participate as an act of charity or "help." Feroza (see chapter 2.5) told me that she had no intention to establish contact with me when I first met her at a community event. Later on, she explains, she was urged to contact me through someone else: "That is only when NN told me that: 'You go and talk to him' and you know like, 'help someone gain insight into their studies.' That's why I came to you." Such a position might lead to the unfortunate consequence that the respondent in question is probing for the "right" or "best" answers from the perspective of the interviewer (i.e., the social desirability bias). While it is difficult to identify such cases directly, judging by Feroza's openness and explicitness, one can perhaps conclude that if it did play a role, it was nevertheless beneficial to the purposes of the study.

Finally, several respondents stated that their participation was motivated in part by a desire to learn more about their religion and about themselves. This was, along with "curiosity," the most frequently stated reason when I asked respondents directly. The latter point cannot be overestimated. Both Arnaz and Rustom's portraits show how this curiosity also influences how they internalize and later make use of the specific questions.

The examples provided here illustrate how respondents used the interviews as a resource for personal and religious reflection and development. They also show to a certain extent that those same interviews contributed to molding their relational feelings towards the fire(s), partly at a conscious and, apparently, partly at a subconscious level. Instead of perhaps judging questions as requiring formal answers, they are often seen as arguments in and of themselves or reasonable starting points for discussion in the context of

an interview. The core of the issue, it seems, is that one cannot limit the impact of the scholar in such personal changes without at the same time partly ignoring the agency of the respondent and their right to develop their thinking and modify their behavior. One cannot argue for a limiting impact without also implying that respondents have little agency and stake in the interview and interaction.

Behnaz's response to why she decided to participate in the study illustrates this latter point: "When I first read the first mail that came through—I've always been academically also inclined towards the religion, so I thought this would give me a chance to know a little more from you, too, and what exactly do you look for in my religion … Like my mom says: 'Questioning opens the mind, telling shuts it.'" In addition to treating me as a potentially useful resource for knowledge about Zoroastrianism, she states that her curiosity was related to her academic inclinations.

By way of summary and conclusion, religious micro-change at the level of the individual is complex in the sense that it is relatively hard to detect. Moreover, such changes are always potentially temporary, as implied by Rustom when he states that he might or might not, in due time, go back to his "usual routine." This indicates that relationships to non-human entities such as gods and temple fires (and people's self-reflective understanding of them) are dynamic as well. As such, the role of the scholar as a potential catalyst of reflective processes which may or may not lead to change also depends on the individual her/himself, and such changes may or may not be permanent.

In this section, I have discussed religious change at the level of the individual from a critical post-fieldwork perspective, with a special focus on the role of the ethnographic interviewer (i.e., myself) as an agent in this process. I have shown that this impact, with a special focus on the "afterlife of questions," is inevitable because respondents themselves are agents in and of themselves and not passive answering machines leading to the co–creation of data. Based on two cases, we have seen how this impact manifested and which method turned out to be valuable in detecting it. I tend to agree with Graham Harvey (2011) when he concludes that "researchers should not actively set out to cause change but neither should they shy away from the inevitable fact that their presence, observation and questions will cause reactions" (234).

Unless it is itself made a part of the research design, such impact on religious change at the micro-level will relatively easily go unnoticed. Detecting and understanding such impacts demands the right methodology. Arguably, my repeated visits made this kind of impact more visible than a more continuous presence in the field might have done.

Conducting field research over longer periods of time, making acquaintances, developing social relationships, and sometimes probing into theological issues and practices and asking questions that might feel alien—or at least not a part of everyday discussions and personal reflections—are likely to initiate changes at the level of individual reflection. In this sense, we, as

scholars, are indeed "inscribed into the history of the religion we believe we are merely documenting" (de Jong 2008, 200). Based on the present discussion, I claim that the problem with this is not that we are inscribed as agents into the religious field with which we engage, but rather the naïve assumption that we are or could be mere documenters.

3.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I broaden the scope with a more theoretically and methodologically minded approach to understand the phenomenon that is relationships with holy fires, from various angles using a set of different theoretical and methodological perspectives. In chapter 3.1, I described a set of different ways of talking about the fires by identifying different clusters of concepts occurring together with fire(s), the key concept. A central finding is that these clusters are identifiable but not mutually exclusive ways of talking about the fires. Together they form a shared vocabulary drawn on by Parsis in different social and religious contexts. Moreover, the analysis in chapter 3.1 shows that one can generalize from the portraits when taking the whole source material into consideration. Matching the operationalizations of "basic" and "personal" relationships developed in chapter 1, almost half of the respondents delivered reports from their day-to-day lives that fit the definition of basic relationships, and the cases of sixteen respondents can be analyzed as personal relationships. Among the respondents, men were more likely to establish such basic relationships with fire(s) than women. This gender-based difference is likely due to the specific gender roles in Parsi Zoroastrian religion: Only men can be priests, and because of the professional care they give the fires, priests are more likely to establish personal relationships with them.

In chapters 3.2–3.5, I analyzed the source material by applying a set of theoretical approaches emerging as promising perspectives from the coding process. The main aim was to explore how sociocultural, ritual, and material factors and processes play a role in when, why, and how people form relationships with non-human entities, using the temple fires as the main case. In chapter 3.2, I applied *affordance* theory. Several processes provoke and invite reflections on the ontology and nature of the consecrated temple fire: the process of constructing a consecrated temple fire; the visual, sensual, and material context of worship; ritual actions performed by priests; and finally, the behavior of other devotees. Phrased in theoretical language, the consecration process is an institutionalized attempt to redefine affordances originally associated with fire by making them physically inaccessible to all worshippers except the officiating priest. The fires are perceived through this sociocultural filter, which redefines the affordances of fire altogether. The fires are reconfigured and transformed into individual, biological, and potentially

immortal beings needing physical and spiritual nurturance. Subsequently, and crucially, this reconfiguration also triggers relationships. In the process, the fires are transformed from ritual objects to subjects of devotion.

In chapter 3.3, I read the interviews in light of *exchange* theory. I argued that respondents' repeated partaking in ritualized exchanges in one of the many fire temples over time provides the main structure for repeated interaction and embodies notions of relationships. By giving sandalwood and applying the ash on their foreheads, respondents embody the exchanges which subsequently generate—but also sustain and strengthen—notions of relationships between the worshippers and the fires. It does so by way of framing and coordinating how people relate to fires by making interaction more transparent and predictable, generating the notion of the fires as social beings, and constituting the key mechanism which produces notions of relationships between my respondents and their fires of choice. The widely read and recited *Atash Niyaesh* prayer plays an important role. While the interaction presented in the text simulates an exchange of gifts, the prayer functions as a template which provides instructions outlining the different steps and the expected outcome of the interaction. Most respondents add requests for boons and blessings to the initial offering, which reshapes the interaction by turning it into a kind of gift exchange. For some respondents, such gift exchange only provides the basis for something more elaborate: personal relationships. Ritualized exchange interactions from childhood onwards arguably become a way of creating notions of relationships, which in turn become ends in themselves.

In chapters 3.4 and 3.5, I connected the material to theories of social support. The case study offers qualitative evidence that the temple fires, as a kind of non-human entity, serve as potent and *bona fide* resources for social support. The analysis shows that the temple fires are utilized by many respondents as a kind of social-environmental resource providing emotional and coping support in particular. In addition to being perceived as empathic and attentive companions, the fires are often also attributed with divine agency and ability to act and solve problems accordingly. Arguably, the mere perception of being in an emotionally satisfying and potentially long-lasting relationship with a partner who provides opportunities to confide and offer support when in need can have psychological effects in itself. The fires are perceived as socially supportive companions, and the key difference between interpersonal relationships with human beings contra the fires seems to lie the availability of support: The fires are always available when needed.

The relationships respondents form with the consecrated temple fires seem to operate as supplements to their social lives. The suggested "supplement model" is more plausible and flexible than the other two ("need model" and "lack model" respectively), suggesting that relations with non-humans do not necessarily arise as a social lack or a need but can develop and/or function as supplements to interhuman relations. As an example, many respondents

utilize the fires to disclose issues concerning their human peers and interhuman relations. The provision of unconditional support from an empathetic and attentive listener is a key to understanding why the fires are turned to with such favor when perceptions of them as sociable beings are in place. In many cases, such relations provide a kind of unconditional support structure which most respondents are unable to extract from their immediate social environment. In this way, they provide human-like but at the same time superhuman benefits in relationships. That such relations function as confidant relationships seem to be, for many, the key motivation to sustain and cater them in the first place.

In chapter 3.6, I analyzed how and to what extent, I, as the ethnographic outsider, had an impact on (at least) some of my respondents' answers. To analyze the relationship, I constructed two modes of interaction between me and my respondents: the *cooperative* mode and the *co–creative* mode. Conducting field research over longer periods of time with all its social implications is likely to initiate changes at the level of individual reflection. It was mainly when my interview questions (and scholarly presence) instigated processes of introspection that apparently led respondents to modify, replace, or discard existing conceptions, ideas, or practices. The very interviews contributed to shaping the respondents' relational feelings towards the fire(s), either consciously or subconsciously. This impact is inevitable since respondents are not passive subjects but agents in and of themselves. The outcome is, to a certain degree, a co-creation of data. This study, then, is necessarily the product not of a mere documentation on my part but of my interaction with my respondents.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

The purpose of this study has been to explore how, when, and why humans relate to the non-human world. By combining a person-centered and relational approach to everyday religion, this book provides a systematic investigation of the role of temple fires as an example of a non-human entity in the lives of present-day Parsi Zoroastrians in India. Thus, this study fills a lacuna in the study of Zoroastrianism and utilizes fresh ethnographic material from present-day Zoroastrianism as practiced in India. Hence, it adds to the study of one religion, as well as to our understanding of a theoretical problem in the study of religions: How, why, and when people develop relationships with non-human entities such as gods and ritual fires. One of the conclusions to be drawn from this study is that the temple fires are an important component in many of my respondents' devotional lives.

The final sample comprises interviews with fifty-four individuals, fourteen of whom were interviewed more than once, six of whom were interviewed during two field trips. Having multiple interviews with the same people over time allowed for a certain degree of openness and contributed to a depth of detail, which illustrates the advantage of a relational approach. In addition to semi-structured interviews, I conducted structured observations in the temple through an assistant, as well as participant observations, in addition to other techniques. My methodological approach tapped into parts of respondents' day-to-day life, uncovering connections between biographies and religious careers which have gone largely unexplored in the study of contemporary Parsi Zoroastrianism—indeed sometimes unexplored by the respondents themselves. This latter issue was taken as the starting point for a discussion of the somewhat unintended but inevitable impact which scholars can have on religious change at the level of the individual.

From their childhood, many Parsi Zoroastrians are taught to treat fire in general as something special. At the same time, they are socialized into a temple setting where the consecrated fires are the focal point of attention. In this study, I adapted Gibson's affordance theory to the case examples. Fire affords both a focal point in meditation and a means to connect to Ahura Mazda. A temple fire's perceived affordance is reconfigured when utilized for ritual and religious purposes. As such, the case constitutes an illuminating case of how culture informs and shapes folk perfection of a naturally occurring phenomenon with a large set of ecological (or functional) affordances. The sociocultural approach to affordances developed here shows that the environment surrounding the object is manipulated to the extent that the skills, attributes, and physical characteristics of the observer are made irrelevant

with regards to perceiving and utilizing the objects' affordances. This is an illuminating case of culture-laden affordances. Such an extended comprehension of Gibson's affordance theory is fruitful for the study of religion(s) and particularly valuable because it provides an example of how to further understand the many ways in which cultural processes inform perception, and, in doing so, the important role of the material, ritual and, social context. The main finding achieved by applying affordance theory, however, is that a key affordance of the temple fires is that they are perceived as social entities and plausible participants in potentially long-term and meaningful personal relationships with its worshippers. That is where their main relevance lies.

In contrast to both affordance theory and theories of social support, exchange theory has been extensively used in the study of religion(s) to theorize and make sense of interactions between humans and gods. It was, in fact, the first model proposed to understand religious sacrifice. In my study, exchange theory is specifically employed to explore the *generative* function of rituals for the development of relationships. A key mechanism in establishing notions of relationships in the first place is arguably the participation in ritualized exchange sequences. To this ritualized format, respondents add requests for additional boons and blessings, effectively turning ritualized exchanges into everyday gift exchanges, where gifts are given and sometimes returned. Combined with lay exegeses of the *Atash Niayesh*, such embodied exchange interactions guide and frame interactions between worshippers and the fires, where conversational prayers are another important element. Personal relationships are built upon these exchanges; relationships that are interwoven into the fabric of the everyday for many respondents.

My analysis shows that Parsi Zoroastrian priests are more likely to form relationships with the temple fires than non-priests. For most non-priests, the main role of the fire priest is to provide the fires with ritual care and daily maintenance, thereby functioning more as facilitators of rituals rather than necessary intermediaries in laypeople's own relationships with fires. Possible areas of further research include exploring to what extent the findings presented in this book can be generalized, also with a greater attention to differences (and similarities) between age- and gender-based groups. It would also be worthwhile to investigate to a greater extent influences from the broader cultural environment on perceptions of fire(s) specifically and relationships with non-humans more generally. A direction this could take is a comparative study of the role of fire in Parsi Zoroastrianism and Hinduism. Such a study could contribute to carving out illuminating similarities and differences between two culturally related cases of fire-related worship, as well as the degree to which ritual and religious factors guide individual perceptions of the same entity in different religious contexts.

The topic of social support likewise emerged from the coding. As shown, the social support literature includes religious identity, thought, and practice as variables, but few studies from within the study of religion(s) exist using

social support as analytical or explanatory frameworks to understand the phenomenon. Engaging with the social support literature offers a set of categories, distinctions, and assumptions—a meta-language—to analyze the processes whereby people form a personal relationship with a fire, as a type of non-human being. On the one hand, this casts new light on social support provision itself and contributes by providing a context-sensitive, cross-cultural, and qualitative study—a kind of study which largely does not exist in the literature on social support. On the other hand, the analysis shows how theories of social support can be utilized in the study of religion(s), especially by focusing on the relational aspect of religious thought and behavior. Since it is based on interhuman relations, social support by extension provides a comparative aspect. To paraphrase Benson Saler (2004), applying theories made for human beings to religious beliefs and practices is one way to make the study of religion(s) more relevant and realistic.

My findings suggest that provision of social support is a strong motivational factor in establishing and sustaining relationships with fires. The temple fires are turned to in times of stress and distress, and relating to them is utilized as a kind of coping mechanism. The feeling of being heard and/or helped before, during, or after stressful situations reinforces respondents' perception that the fires are available for help at a later stage as well. Furthermore, the fires are there for worshippers not only in times of stress but also in times of joy and excitement. A key finding is that the temple fires are experienced as confidants. They are perceived as relational partners that enable respondents to confide in a trustworthy companion about personal experiences, feelings, and life crises, including issues—sometimes particularly problematic—stemming from their interhuman relationships.

The present study provides suggestive evidence not only that non-human entities such as the temple fires must be considered relational entities analogous to humans, but also that the kind of support provided by the fires and their availability in providing it is experienced as comparable—and in some cases, superior—to support received from human peers. As entities, the temple fires are characterized by the combination (and tension) of human-like, non-human, and superhuman features, traits, and characteristics. Their main superhuman trait is that they can offer superior support and more complete relationships compared to humans. The present case study adds to the growing number of studies showing not only that humans relate to non-human entities when socially deprived, as some theoretical models suggest, but also that these relationships can be supplements to already existing interhuman relationships.

This study also expands our understanding of relationships typical of religious practice in general. Serious attention to such relations will, according to Saler (2009), "work for better balance in our overall understanding of religion" (130). People not only "believe" in divine beings and reason about their ontological status but also attempt to interact with such entities through

prayers and signal willingness to engage through offerings. This case study demonstrates that a further step is needed: a focus on *relationality*. My findings suggest that future approaches to religion as a social phenomenon will benefit from moving beyond mere interaction to exploring how and when engagement with religious entities can lead to long-term and emotionally satisfying personal relationships, thus paving the way for a more nuanced and relevant theory of religion as something interwoven into people's everyday lives.

The consecrated fire, as a material example linking object to god, is a perfect case for bringing such discussions to the heart of the study of religion. This study expands and offers both new theoretical perspectives and data to our understanding of a key element in both theoretical and definitional debate in the study of religion(s): how, why, and when people develop relationships with non-human entities such as gods and ritual fires. From a meta-theoretical perspective, this study demonstrates the utility of a multi-contextual and interdisciplinary approach taking individual, cultural, and material factors as well as ritual and social processes into consideration while exploring human relationships with non-humans. The portraits in chapter 2 show that relationships with the temple fires (or in one case, the water deity) take on idiosyncratic features. Crucially, the portraits serve as testaments to how four individuals' different life stories and personalities have been shaped, and continue to be shaped, by their relationships with the temple fires. Relation-ships with the fires both affect and are affected by respondents' interhuman relationships. They also reveal personal as well as social and ritual generative factors which offer important contextual information when attempting to analyze the emergence of such relationships.

Last but not least, the findings show, to paraphrase Alfred Gell (1998), that the immediate "other" in a personal relationship does not need to be another human being. This study offers further suggestive evidence that relationships with non-human entities—in our case the temple fires—can be experienced as no less real, important, and meaningful than those with other human beings. The fire has a fluid range of characteristics as a relational partner, serving as a different sort of relational entity to different people in different contexts. To the worshipper, the fire can listen and provide help or support, like a friend. It can share joy and grief, like a companion. It can offer protection in life, like a parent. It can offer spiritual guidance, like a teacher. It needs sustenance, love, and care, like a child, and requires respect like a king. To the believer, the fire *can* be a friend, a companion, a parent, a teacher, a child, or a king—in every case a relational partner in times of joy and in times of sorrow.

Appendix: Presentation of respondents

In the following paragraphs, I briefly present those respondents whom I have quoted in the dissertation. I have been selective with regards to what and how much information I disclose about each individual to minimize the risk of identification and safeguard their anonymity.

Adarbad, in his late forties, was one of the people with whom I spent most time during both field trips. We often sat on the veranda connected to the Adaran temple, where he worked as a full-time *boiwalla*, and talked about not only religious but also political matters, both in India and abroad. After having traveled abroad extensively owing to his previous job, he eventually decided to continue his family tradition and become a full-time priest.

Afarin (f) and **Jawahar** (m), newly married at the time, were both in their late twenties when I met them during the second field trip. As soon as we were seated in their newly furbished apartment in one of the larger colonies in Mumbai, the topic of intermarriage and the gap between generations were discussed. During the interview, Afarin kept returning to her view of Zoroastrianism as patriarchic and of how current religious practices represent an unfavorable attitude toward non-Parsis. During their wedding ceremony, these gaps—not only between generations but also between families—became apparent when Jawahar's mother worked to keep Afarin from hugging her friends so as to avoid contact with non-Parsis.

Alma, a secretary in her fifties, grew up in what she calls a non-religious family environment in Mumbai. "My daddy used to smoke," she says at one point, to emphasize the attitude. Treating fire as holy extends well beyond the temple sphere, and smoking is typically considered not only a religious but also a social taboo. Alma is one of many respondents who were positively inclined to relate to divine beings of other religions.

Amjad, a man in his late thirties, was attending Avestan classes, which is where I first met him. Amjad was the only respondent who came to the interview with a written list of topics he thought we should discuss. He mainly uses the temple fires as a focusing point during meditation, and he was among those respondents who were categorical in the assertion that the fires are neither living entities nor able to communicate.

Anahita, a woman in her late forties, was brought up in a Christian convent school in Nagpur. I met her after a community celebration during my first field trip. One characteristic of Anahita was her openness to other religions and viewpoints and her interest in New Age and related practices. During my second interview in her apartment, we were in the presence of someone whom she called a "Hindu Guru" and a "spiritual counselor," and who remained silent throughout the interview.

Arnaz: See portrait, chapter 2.2.

Behnaz, an English teacher by profession, was at the time of the interviews in her mid-forties. Behnaz's approach to her religion can be described as academically oriented. Her description of her close and personal relationship with two temple fires is detailed in chapter 3.4.2, in relation to her experience of being supported during the period after she suffered a stroke. Behnaz and I interacted frequently during both field trips.

Darius, a chartered accountant by profession, was in his late sixties when I interviewed him twice during my first field trip. Moving from Hyderabad, where he grew up, Darius pursued career opportunities in one of the larger cities in Andhra Pradesh, ultimately moving to Mumbai after he turned thirty. Parts of his life story are unfolded in chapter 3.

Dinshaw, a retired priest in his late fifties, still conducted certain ceremonies upon request when I met him several times during the first field trip. While preparing for the second field trip, I was informed that he had passed away. I cherish the memories of our extensive conversations.

Farah, a woman in her late sixties hailing from what she describes as a very religiously minded family, started going to the fire temple at a very young age. Farah is a staunch follower of the Khshnoom movement.

Fariba, a woman in her forties, is quoted only once based on a short interview (chapter 3.3.9).

Farya was an entertaining woman in her early sixties when I met her. In addition to our two interviews, we conversed frequently since she lived in the same colony where I was staying. Having previously worked in a hotel, Farya was at the time trying to subsist selling her own produce. Her relational description of the temple fires provides one of the more passionate accounts in the entire source material.

Feroza: See portrait, chapter 2.5.

Gulrukh, a woman in her late forties, grew up in Sri Lanka before moving to India and Mumbai. Gulrukh was one of seven women whom I interviewed together, others being **Dinaz**, **Shahnaz**, and **Behar**—all taking Avestan classes together.

Havaspas is a younger *boiwalla* at one of the Atash Behram temples in Mumbai. I spent a considerable amount of time with this enthusiastic and energetic man. He was originally from a city in the Jalgaon district in the state of Maharashtra. At an early age, he left his family and moved to Mumbai with his brother to become a full-time priest.

Hoshang, a priest in his late twenties, was my first respondent. Seated at his old school bench in the Dadar Athornan Madressa, he explained that after finalizing his *martab* training, subsequently working as a full-time priest for a while, he decided to complete his studies in accountancy because priesthood, as he said, was not lucrative enough. He was still working as a freelance priest, conducting rituals upon request.

Jamasp was the head priest of an Adaran temple and one of the so-called "scholar priests."

Khosrow was interviewed together with his wife, **Parendi,** both in their seventies, in a long interview lasting several hours and involving quite a lot of laughter! Khosrow explains that he started reading about Zoroastrianism early in his youth, and at a certain point he also started holding talks and presentations on religious matters. Khosrow's account of his personal relationship with one of the temple fires is distinct (but not unique): He has a personal relationship with one of the Dadgah fires in one of the major fire temples in India. During our conversation, one particular topic sparked Parendi's interest: her husband's relationship with the Dadgah fire. "I have different ideas from my husband," she said; he "feels more comfortable … near the Dadgah." She continues: "Since [19]55 he's [her husband] here, so how many years, many years!" The temple that Khosrow frequents is one of the larger Adaran temples, and in the following quote they both answer the question of why he feels closer to the Dadgah fire:

Khosrow: Because there *you* are tending to the fire personally.
Parendi: He will go there [and] take that *chamach* ladle, [the] steel ladle.
Khosrow: And put a log of fire, [and] clean up the whole place.
Parendi: And yeah, I say he's a priest's son; he'll tend to it that way.
Khosrow: It's very, very—it gives a very exhilarating feeling that you're able to do it yourself [both laughing]; because the other fires we cannot go near—the main, highly consecrated fires we cannot go near.

In Khosrow's case, tending the fire is not only synonymous with giving sandalwood but also includes cleaning the fire vase, making it neat for the fire, thus performing the duties of a *boiwalla*. His daily practice is also attested by other respondents, and one religious expert professed that he had seen Khosrow do this ever since he himself started college, often late in the evening, when the temple was about to close.

Khojeste Mistree: See chapters 1 and 3.

Khurshed, a young *boiwalla* connected to the Iranshah. I met him briefly during my trip to Udvada.

Navaz, a graphic designer (and painter), was in her late twenties when we met for our only interview in the library connected to the Dadar Athornan Madressa. Even though she says that she comes from an "extremely religious" home environment, Navaz decided not to wear the *sudre* and *kusti* early on and takes what she calls a more moderate approach to religion in general. She frequents a Kali temple near her home due to its serene atmosphere. She utilizes the temple fires mainly for meditational purposes.

Nirosha is a woman in her late sixties originally from Pune. Now a pensioner, she worked in a nursing school for quite some time. She was one of my first respondents, having approached me immediately after I had given my presentation at the temple anniversary. Her story is narrated in chapter 3.4.2.

Ramiyar Karanjia: See chapter 1.

Roshan, a woman in her early sixties, invited me for dinner in her apartment in Shapur Baug. At one point during the interview (which lasted less than an hour), her alarm clock interrupted our conversation, whereupon she immediately stopped talking. The time was 12:39 p.m., and the astrologically minded Roshan started reciting a passage from the *Atash Niyaesh*. According to her beliefs, and as a famous Parsi astrologer speculated that at specific times during the day, Mumbai is linked spiritually with the Iranshah fire, Parsi Zoroastrians could, by their prayers, establish and reinforce such a connection.

Rustom: See portrait, chapter 2.3.

Sarosh: See portrait, chapter 2.4.

Tanaz, in her late twenties, was about to obtain her university degree when I met her early during the first field trip. She says that she comes from a very religiously minded family, and characteristic of her accounts is how she feels

torn between her family's expectations concerning religious commitment contra the expectations of her large social network of more secular-minded friends, both Parsis and non-Parsis. As many other younger Parsis, she practices meditation, with the fire being the ultimate focusing point.

Yasmin, a practicing anesthesiologist in her mid-forties, comes from a priestly family. Her brothers had opted to continue the priestly family line but later quit.

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