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# DocZow: documentation of intergenerational transmission in Zoroastrian women's silk weaving

## Introduction

The DocZow project was launched in May 2024 to provide an innovative interdisciplinary approach to examining the intergenerational transmission of silk weaving as praxis and terminology through the intangible cultural heritage of Zoroastrian women. Although Iranian textiles are globally recognised for their high quality and long tradition and have therefore been studied from various perspectives, no systematic study of Zoroastrian oral sources related to weaving exists.

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## Various aspects of DocZow

The first spark of research on silk weaving and the methods of intergenerational transmission of this intangible heritage began with receiving a grant (2021–2022) from the Department of Experimental Linguistics at the Goethe University in Frankfurt (Preservation and documentation of the language of Zoroastrian weavers and art of weaving). A decade ago, the head of this department produced a documentary film of a skilled Zoroastrian weaver, which showed her trying to pass on textile knowledge before her death. The Zoroastrian weaver spoke one of the 24 dialects of the Zoroastrian special language (Dari Behdini). She used textile terminology, which added to the difficulty of decoding her information, because silk weaving is the intangible heritage of Zoroastrian women, who hold a monopoly on practicing this craft. Being born in a Zoroastrian family, mastering all sub-branches of the Zoroastrian dialect, and in addition, my expertise in Iranian and Zoroastrian culture and art helped me

to extract and publish textile information from the documentary film (Pashootanzadeh 2022).

My research will be accomplished through an investigation of Zoroastrian women's silk weaving and a glossary in Dari Behdini and in English, which will include all aspects of terminology and the intergenerational transmission of silk weaving techniques.

The main policy of DocZow is based on the oral traditions and literature of Zoroastrian women, and in addition to silk and its secrets, it is related to the different characteristics of silk weavers and their audience as human beings. For this reason, this project has broad aspects that can be considered equal to the different dimensions of a human being.

## 1) Zoroastrian religion and culture

The author of the book *Silk and Religion* believes that Zoroastrianism is related to silk (Liu 2007, 24).

So, the first aspect of this research is based on the



Fig. 1: Zoroastrian women's silk dress at the Iranian Dolls and the Culture Museum (Images: Ali Golshan)



Fig. 2: Zoroastrian women's silk dress at Iranian Dolls and the Culture Museum (Image: Ali Golshan)

Zoroastrian religion, which overlaps with the symbols of Zoroastrian cultural identity.

In the Zoroastrian religion, the soul is a symbol of immortality, which is identified with the silk dress in Zoroastrian women's culture (figs. 1 and 2). Although clothes are considered the second skin of the body (Turner 1980/1993), the silk clothes of Zoroastrian women are the second skin of their souls. The reason why several Zoroastrian women's silk dresses survived until now is that the inheritance of the dress of the deceased maintains the continuation of the reincarnation chain of the second soul. This law was not true for non-silk clothes.

In its homeland, China, silk was known as the clothing of the dead leading to the ascension of the soul to heaven (Zhao 2022, 16) but among Zoroastrian women, it was always considered as the clothing of the living and as an immortal soul, which included an important part of their cultural identity. Zoroastrianism was the official religion during the Sassanid era (from 224 to 651 CE), when Chinese silk was imported to Iran through the Silk Road, and it led to the establishment of silk textile workshops inside and outside Iran. Due

to the importance of purity in the Zoroastrian religion, using silk and adding pigment to it were considered religious transgressions.

#### **According to the laws of purity in Zoroastrianism:**

1) Insects are impure and must be destroyed. The insects are called *xrafstra* and are created by the devil. Also, in the story of Tahmūres, which is a part of Zoroastrian religious literature, the devil teaches the method of sericulture to the wife of Tahmūres (Mazdapour 1999, 186). But the presence of the devil as a teacher of sericulture and the creator of silkworms did not stop the growth and publication of silk weaving by Zoroastrian women because of religious obstacles.

It seems that the efforts of Zoroastrian clerics to spread silkworms in the Sassanid era led to ignoring religious obstacles and making changes in Zoroastrian religious jurisprudence. First, because silkworms were spread further westward to Constantinople by Persian monks (Zhao 2022, 24) and secondly, in the *Bundahishn* book, which was compiled after *Vendidad*, silkworms and bees, whose wax is used



for silk weaving, were declared exempt from the *xrafstra* law (Bahar 1991, 99).

2) Natural dyeing and impregnating fibres with pigments leads to contamination. In addition, dyeing fabric with insect extracts such as coccus was associated with more Sharia prohibition according to *xrafstra* law (Mazdapour 2005, 257).

The jurisprudential law of living happily, which was more important than the law of cleanliness, led to the removal of legal obstacles in dyeing, and the only condition was the use of shiny and bright colours to spread the feeling of happiness. Because the rules of purity were established to maintain physical health and the rules of happiness were established for the health of the soul, which was the priority. According to Zoroastrian religious texts, Ahuramazda is a god of happiness, Zoroaster is a prophet who was born with a smile. Zoroastrians worship with gladness and believers speak happily in their prayers. Great gods and goddesses such as Mehr, Ashi, Tishtar and Anahita bring happiness to Zoroastrians, and the ultimate wish is happiness.

Therefore, silk and silk products were recognised as symbols of happiness and led to the creation of oral literature with happy themes, which is the most important feature of children's literature. Zoroastrian women weave colourful bracelets from silk threads to give as gifts during the Tirgan festival, which is meant to honour the Tishtar god. They believe that wishes live like silkworms inside these bracelets, which are a symbol of the silk cocoon, and after ten days, turn into beautiful butterflies and fly in the wind. For this reason, Zoroastrians remove these silk bracelets from their hands on the day that belongs to the Wind god and leave them to the wind to achieve their wishes. The same concept of happiness and wish fulfilment can be seen in the Zoroastrian shrine (*Seti-pir*) where women tie coloured silk threads to the water wheel in order for the water goddess Anahita to fulfil their wishes.

## 2) Oral literature and tradition

The second aspect of the DocZow project is oral history, which aims to teach the secrets of silk to Zoroastrian girls.

The oral history and tradition in Zoroastrianism has an ancient heritage. The evidence of this claim is the use of the strong oral memory of Zoroastrian priests in 300 CE, which made it possible to collect and revive the Zoroastrian encyclopaedia, *Vendidad* (Marzban 2023). The expansion of this oral memory can be found in the oral history of Zoroastrian women who teach the traditions of silk weaving in the Dari Behdini language



Fig. 3: Bibikük doll in Varjavand collection, Iran (Image: Azadeh Pashootanzadeh)

which has no other purpose than the intergenerational transmission of silk secrets to the Zoroastrian women's community. For this reason, oral language and history act as a vehicle for informal education in order to transmit oral traditions. Intergenerational transmission is key to safeguarding. The transmission of intangible cultural heritage in itself is a form of informal education that happens within communities. As such, it can provide both learning content and methods.

Zoroastrian women weavers use two informal group training methods: 1. Oral storytelling, legends and narratives for teaching theoretical information about silk weaving; and 2. The magical-symbolic theatre plays for teaching practical skills and techniques through motion spells that the audience had to imitate at the same time as the narration of legends. Theatrical movements were planned for two purposes: 1) Learning the practical steps of textile production and its repetition in the production process of silk textiles; and 2) Performing physical exercise necessary to

strengthen the muscles of the weavers. This double method changed with the industrial revolution. This not only changed the clothes and weakened the traditional weaving of Zoroastrians, it also made the narration of oral legends unimportant and lost the audience of women and girls as silk weavers. Instead, it was now the so-called “witches” or “sorcerers”, the female Zoroastrian magicians, who undertook the task of narrating the legends of silk weaving. However, the belief in the magical properties of these oral legends that accompanied the theatrical performances saved them from complete destruction. For example, the description of how the blue colour appears due to the oxidation of indigotin was assumed to be a magical practice (Tamburini 2022, 76).

The performance of puppet theatre with fabric dolls and symbolism showed the phases of silk weaving. Recycled fabrics are used to make the Bibikūk female doll (fig. 3) which is the protagonist of oral legends in magical-symbolic theatre performance that helps the audience learn the weaving methods.

But because the narrators, audience, theatre actors and puppeteers no longer know the technical complexities of silk weaving, the performers no longer understand the meaning of these oral legends. Moreover, the frequent migrations of Zoroastrian women have caused the audiences to be separated from their original cultural context and then fail to understand the concepts of oral history and meta-communications in the oral traditions related to silk weaving. Because the intergenerational transfer of silk weaving takes place through family relationships, the migration of young women led to the separation of old weavers from their female relatives and the interruption of the intergenerational transmission chain.

The oral history and tradition of silk weaving is divided into two significant narratives based on the division of duties between women/mothers and girls.

1) The serpent king (explaining the duties of married women and mothers): intermediate difficult stages (weaving, natural dyeing, painting on fabric with natural colours, implementing different techniques to produce fabrics).

2) The fairy king’s daughter (explanation of girls’ duties): initial stages (preparation of raw materials for natural dyeing, sericulture, spinning and sectional beam) and supernumerary stages (embroidery and patchwork).

“High-context” cultures rely more on nonverbal cues and gestures, and “low-context” cultures rely heavily on words and verbal communication. Due to lack of familiarity with different cultural layers, children are placed in the “low-context” group and education is done through language and educational literature. Adults are in the “high-context” category and their educational literature not only includes descriptive and cultural linguistics, but also a combination of non-verbal communication and metacommunication. The basic elements of metacommunication are mental symbols structured into communication codes, that can be understood by surrounding people and that characterise the values of the sociocultural community to which they belong (Presutti 2022, 202). Nonverbal means are highly important in the field of textiles on account of their highly visual nature. Nonverbal representation forms a continuum from figurative to abstract forms, and these configurations can represent a broad array of synonyms (Lervad 2013, 177).



Fig. 4: A witch’s dress decorated with written-spells, Iranian Dolls and Culture Museum, with detail (Images: Ali Golshan)



### 3) *Dari Behdini language*

The oral nature of these legends means the Dari Behdini language plays an important role in increasing the verbal share compared to the non-verbal. Language is the only carrier of cultural nuances and intangible heritage related to silk weaving, which enables intergenerational transmission among Zoroastrian women.

After the destruction of the Sassanids, Zoroastrians migrated from different parts of Iran to two desert cities (Yazd and Kerman) and adopted the Dari Behdini language as an ethnic language. Cultural diversity, multiplicity of languages, dialects and accents of immigrants led to the emergence of many sub-branches in this language. Therefore, the dialect continuum/dialect chain existing throughout Iran met at these two cities and created unique trans-cultural diffusion. Sociolinguistics and sociocultural approaches are suitable tools to decode some unusual and rare spells related to silk weaving terms used by Zoroastrian witches.

1) Verbal spells derived from onomatopoeias that were produced by tools and looms while working. These onomatopoeias are still used as old names for some tools and mechanical parts in the terminology of silk textiles.

2) Written spells inspired by oral history related to silk weaving were copied onto silk textiles (fig. 4).

It is difficult to understand the meaning of the symbolic images and to translate them into existing concepts and terms of silk weaving terminology. Because Zoroastrian silk weavers use cultural steganography - hiding messages for the communication of their female society, which they monopolise. However, it is also necessary to focus on the examination of the more specialised words and concepts of silk weaving in the wider context of material culture. Although cultural linguistics helps to decode the terminology of Zoroastrian women's silk weaving, historical linguistics is considered a suitable complement to cultural linguistics/ethnolinguistics due to the numerous migrations of Zoroastrians throughout history.

### 4) *Cultural economy and sociocultural anthropology*

"Activity benefits" are close substitutes to the cultural and leisure economy and are therefore predominantly a private good enjoyed by the person undertaking the activity (Gørtz 2006, 9). Allocating a part of the income obtained from the sale of silk products for the sake of education and intergenerational transmission,

dissemination and marketing of silk weaving by Zoroastrian women led to the transformation of their homes into educational and business environments. For this reason, female neighbours were considered colleagues and together they created a wide range of terms related to silk weaving and its cultural economy which could only be understood in the Zoroastrian women's local community. These words include trade names for various silk techniques and products, symbolic code names for numbers, business terms and social relations between colleagues, buyers and merchants that exist in commercial invoices. Therefore, the methods from cultural economy and sociocultural anthropology can be used for this part. Sociocultural anthropology is a portmanteau term used to refer to social anthropology and cultural anthropology together. It is one of the four main branches of anthropology. Sociocultural anthropologists focus on the study of society and culture.

### **Aims and methodology**

The overarching aim of this project is to collect, extract and record the silk textile heritage in the intergenerational transmission of Zoroastrian women, and to explain the methods of transmission through oral history and intangible culture. DocZow aims to achieve four main results.

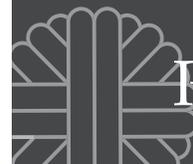
1. A documentation and collection of Zoroastrian oral traditions and literature about women's silk textiles, in their original languages accompanied by English translations.

2. A glossary of textile terminology in oral sources and the equivalence of mixed or different terms with Dari Behdini terms and concepts, and their translation into English.

3. An interdisciplinary investigation and discussion of silk textile weaving of Zoroastrian women in the chain of intergenerational transmission using oral history.

4. A comprehensive investigation of the intergenerational transmission as intangible cultural heritage and material culture related to Zoroastrian women's silk textiles as a symbol of cultural identity.

The methodology of this project is highly interdisciplinary. The methods are descriptive-analytical, and the type of research is qualitative. Collecting information from the Zoroastrian populations, which includes literature, culture and oral traditions, will be done 1. in library research, 2. as fieldwork and 3. using written and oral documents (interviews with 19 or 20 people) - most as semi-structured interviews, supplemented by a selection of in-depth interviews.



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