

The Priest

Parsi, Iranian and Avestan

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The Parsi Mode

The Initiation as Nâvar and Martab

In India, it is only the sons of priests or of the members of the priestly families who can become priests. The right can be revived by any male member of the priestly family, though his immediate ancestors may not actually have been priests. The right can be revived by a descendant up to the fifth generation. Otherwise, it then dies and can no longer be exercised. In order to be a thoroughly qualified priest, one has to go through two grades of initiations and their ceremonies. They are (1) the *Nâvar* and (2) the *Martab*.

1. The Navar

The first initiatory ceremony for priesthood is that of *Nâvar*. The word means “one who is newly initiated in work of offering prayers, rites and sacred things to the Deity”. To initiate a person into priesthood, several stages of ceremonies have to be gone through. They are the following: (a) the *Bareshnum*; (b) the *Gewra*; (c) the initiation proper. I give herein an illustration which shows the initiate taking his *Bareshnum*.

- (a) The candidate for initiation into priesthood has to go through two *Bareshnum* purifications [nine-night-and-day ritual of purifying by sipping consecrated bovine urine and purifying the body with unconsecrated bovine urine, dust, consecrated water (by adding drops of consecrated bovine urine), and prayers]. The first *Bareshnum* is said to be for the purification of his own body, the second is for the person in whose memory he becomes a *Navar*. Between the first *Bareshnum* and the second there may be an interval of a few days if it is so desired, or, the candidate may begin the second *Bareshnum* on the same day when he finishes the first. In that case, both the *Bareshnums* take 19 days in all. During these days, the candidate is to say his prayers five times during the day. He is expected to pass his time in a religious or pious mood. If, during any of the days of the *Bareshnums*, he has a *pollutis nocturna* [wet dream], that vitiates his *Bareshnum*. He must begin the *Bareshnum* again. If the case happens in the second *Bareshnum*, he has to repeat only the second *Bareshnum*. To avoid this risk, nowadays, the candidate for priesthood goes through the initiation at a very early age, between 15 and 16, when he is likely to be free from such risk. The second *Bareshnum* is for the *niyat* [in the name] of somebody. If that somebody is a lady, he must take care that he goes through the second *Bareshnum* and the subsequent ceremonies of *Gewra*, and initiation at a time, when there is no chance of that lady's passing through her monthly course. If she has her monthly course, that vitiates the ceremony which must be begun again when the lady has passed through her course and purified herself. If the person, male or female, in whose *niyat* the ceremony is gone through, dies during the period of those ceremonies, that event also vitiates the whole thing.

- (b) On the candidate completing the Bareshnum, two qualified priests who “hold the Bareshnum”, who have to initiate the candidate, perform what is known as the *gewra* ceremony, which lasts for six days. This ceremony, which qualified them to initiate the candidate, consists of reciting the Yasna with its ritual for six consecutive days. Both the priests recite the whole Yasna with the necessary ritual. One of the two priests who recites the whole Yasna is called *Joti*. The other priest who assists him in going through the ceremony is called *Rathwi*. The priest, who performs the ceremony as *Joti*, is technically said to have “taken the *gewra*”, i.e. has acquired the qualification of continuing the ceremony. The priest who takes the *gewra* on the first day, is said to have taken the first *gewra*. He is to pass a night of vigil and watchfulness. If he has nocturnal pollution, he is said to have lost the efficacy or the qualification of his *gewra*. The *gewra* must be repeated the next day. If the efficacy continues, on the next day, in the morning, he gives the second *gewra* to his colleague. The other priest recites the Yasna as *Joti* and the priest who gives the *gewra* acts as *Rathwi*. He, now, in his turn, has to pass the night in vigil. Thus, each of the two priests has to “take the *gewra*” on an alternate day. These *gewra* ceremonies are to be performed for six days. To avoid the chance of the *gewras* being vitiated by the failure of the vigil of the priest holding the *gewra* for the particular day or by some other cause, at times, three priests are made to take part in the *gewra* ceremonies. Instead of one taking the *gewra*, two perform the ceremony, so that, if one fails to observe the required vigil and is disqualified for some cause, the other may serve, and the candidate may not be disappointed and the initiation not delayed. The candidate, during these six days, has to pass his time in prayers during the five *Gahs* [prayer times in a day] and to observe all the observances of saying the grace at meals, etc. He is not to come in contact with any non-Zoroastrian.
- (c) On the sixth day of the *gewra* ceremony, the priest who has taken the sixth *gewra*, initiates the candidate. The candidate takes his bath [The *Nahn* bath with consecrated and unconsecrated bovine urine, dust, and consecrated water, simpler than the Bareshnum] in the morning with all its formalities and puts on a new set of white clothes. He puts on a white turban which is a symbol or insignia of priesthood. [He] is dressed in his full dress consisting of *Jama*, which is a loose gown-like dress of white linen, and *pichhori*, a kind of linen-belt, put round the waist. All the male of the gathering are similarly dressed in their full dress. The candidate carries a shawl in his left hand, it being insignia of an office or function which a person holds for life. [He] carries in his right hand a *gurz* or a mace.

The parents of the candidate invite a few friends, both male and female, to witness the ceremony. In mofussil (smaller) towns, a general invitation to males is passed round in the whole town. So any Zoroastrian who chooses may attend.

At the appointed hour, at about nine o'clock in the morning, a procession is formed to take the candidate to the temple for initiation. On the procession arriving at the Fire-temple, the candidate goes to the *Yazashna-gâh* where he is to perform the Yasna ceremony. The assembled priests are generally seated on carpets spread on the floor. The candidate removes his garments which form his full dress, performs the *pâdyâb kushti* and puts on the *padân* (mouth-veil). Thus prepared, he is brought before the assembly by one of the two priests, who asks for permission to initiate him.

The Head-priest present, after the interval of a few seconds, takes the silence of the assembly for its assent and nods his head, or puts both his hands, to signify the acquiescence of the gathering.

The candidate must be free from leprosy or any wound from which blood oozes, otherwise he would be rejected and the necessary permission refused. It is to give the assembly an opportunity to see or examine him well, that he is presented after the removal of the upper garments. The candidate returns to the Yazashna-gah to go through the ceremonies of his initiation to recite the Yasna with its ritual. On returning to the Yazashna-gah, the candidate recites the Navar Yasna (Yasna without the Visparad) with its rituals, he acting as the Joti and the priest who initiates him as the raspi [Rathwi]. In the afternoon, he performs the *bâj* ceremony and takes his meals, after which he performs the *afringân* ceremony.

On the second and the third day, the candidate is permitted to have only one meal. The above three ceremonies are repeated in honor of Sraosha, and the baj is performed on the morning instead of in the afternoon as on the first day. On the third day, the above three ceremonies are repeated in honor of Sirouza (the Yazatas presiding over the thirty days of the month). On the fourth day the Yasna is recited with the Visparad, the baj and afringan in honor of Ahura Mazda. Thus qualified, the priest now called *herbad* (Avesta, *aethrapaiti* ‘teacher’ [Gujarati *Ervad*]) can perform the afringan, Navjote, marriage, and such other ceremonies but not the Yasna, the Vendidad, or the baj ceremonies.

It appears that the “Navar” has been from the first, a ceremony of trial, of self-abnegation, self-denial, and self-renunciation. A good deal of the original lofty ideal seems to be losing its ground now. In order to avoid the risk of failure in the pious meditation, self-abnegation, or control of passions, candidates are made to go through the initiatory ceremony in early boyhood before the age of fifteen or sixteen, when according to the course of nature, they are expected to be free from *pollutis nocturna*. Again, now-a-days it is not only those who are really intended to be priests in the future, go through the initiation but many others who are intended by their parents for other walks of life. The latter are to go through it with the idea that it is a religious ceremony worthy to be gone through. There are many medical men, lawyers, and merchants of the priestly class who have been made to go through it by their parents in their boyhood. That being the case, the whole of the Yasna is not learned and not recited but only a part.

2. The Martab

The second degree for priest is known *Martab*. The degree of *Navar* does not entitle a priest to perform, what may be called, the ceremonies of the inner circle of the Fire-temple. He cannot perform the Yasna, the Vendidad, and the Baj ceremonies. He cannot officiate at the purification ceremonies of *nahn* and *bareshnum*. In order to qualify himself to do so, he must go through the Martab ceremony. Besides the Yasna and the Vispered, which he had to read for his Navarhood, he has now to read the Vendidad.

For this ceremony, the candidate has to go through one Bareshnum of 10 days. On the 11th day, he, in company with a qualified priest, performs the *khub* ceremony and recites for it the Mino Navar Yasna with its ritual. On the second day in the morning, he has to recite another

Yasna in honour of Sarosh, and at midnight he recites the Vendidad. This completes the *Martab* ceremony and he is now entitled to perform and recite any of the Zoroastrian rituals and prayers.

*Condensed from pages 187 to 198, THE RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES AND CUSTOMS OF THE PARSEES, Ervad Shams-ul-Ulama Dr. Sir Jivanji Jamshedji Modi (1854-1933), 2nd ed. (reprint), Bombay, 1986

Note: At present, there are two ways to become a priest among the Parsis:

- (1) Take the full school course of eleven years at the Athornan Madressa, Bombay, in which the student is also taught the rituals in detail. It takes six years to become a Navar in the Madressa, two years to be ordained as Martab, and a total of eleven years to get the Secondary School Certificate.
- (2) The short cut is for those whose parents do not want them to become professional priests and who join other walks of life in business or employment. They do not join the Madressa for the purpose and attend their respective primary and secondary schools in their residential localities, in India or abroad. It takes them between 18 to 28 days to be ordained as priests.

In this second way, the candidate does not recite, as mentioned by the late Ervad Dr. J.J. Modi, the entire Yasna but a part of it. There are some who recite only eleven sections (*hâs*) and there are others who do only seven *hâs*. One is called the “Eleven-hâ” Ervad and the other the “Seven-hâ” Ervad. The remaining of the 61 or 65 sections of 72-ha Yasna are recited by the accompanying *gewra* priest. The majority of the “non-professional” Parsi priests belong to the category of “Eleven or Seven hâ” class. Unless they pursue their religious studies to a desirable height, they tag “Ervad” to their names in name only.

The entire course for initiation into priesthood, Navar or Martab, is to learn to recite the Avesta and Pazand texts by rote and to perform the rituals by practice. They are not taught the two scriptural languages, and they do not understand the true significance of what they do. It is on the university level that one learns the Avesta and Pahlavi languages and literature.

Iranian Mode

Initiation (“Nowzûdi”) as Mobed

The candidate for priesthood must have all the religious information and pass the final examination in the Initiation ceremony, which in fact is a graduation ceremony. The candidates who want to join the spiritual fold and to practice as priests, must work for years under the tutorship of expert and experienced mobeds. In addition to learning Avesta, religious teachings, and the subtleties of rituals, they should also refine their character and manners. The religious teachings include the Khordeh Avesta, Darun, Fravashi, Yasna with the rituals of Gahanbar, annual, days, jashans, and other ceremonies. They should also learn through these years about

the Zoroastrian Religion, its Founder, and other problems concerning the religion so that when they practice mobedship, they can teach the behdins and answer their questions.

A meeting is arranged to test the candidate. It is presided by the Head Mobed and attended by other mobeds. They test his religious knowledge and also see his spiritual and physical soundness and his good manners. After passing the examination, the candidate is allowed to go through his initiation and take up the profession of mobedship.

A number of mobeds meet at the house of the candidate one day before the initiation. They prepare a crown and a *vars*. The crown is a turban wound to fit the candidate's head. It is decorated with gold and silver chains with hanging coins and has other ornaments that make it look like a crown. It has *panâm* (mouth veil) hanging to cover the nose and mouth when worn. The *panam* has also the chained coins attached to it. The *vars* is made of six twigs of pomegranate, fig or willow tree. Each twig is wrapped with colored wool to make the *vars* multicolored. The twigs are made to make a circular pyramid in a plate. It is covered with a thin net. Four mirrors, dry fruit, candies, and a pomegranate are also kept in the plate. The *vars* is carried on head by the *vars-bearer*, who is the person who teaches the candidate how to go through the initiation ceremony.

The Head Mobed and other priests are seated on a platform erected in the yard of the candidate's house. Other guests are seated around, and still others stand in the balconies and on the rooftop. A large blazing fire-vase is kept in the middle of the yard. The candidate stands next to the Head Mobed.

The Head Mobed reads the Initiation Advice. The candidate is advised, among other things, to repent for his past sins and to begin a new religious life of doing good to people, always have God in mind, and remember the Sayings of the Prophet.

Next, all stand, and the candidate is helped by the *vars-bearer* to go around and shake hand with the Head Mobed and other mobeds and say: *Hama-zûr bîm* "Let us unite". Then, all of them join hands and go round the fire three times as they recite the Atash Niyayesh. The candidate carries a T-shape metallic object whose T is swirled by him with his finger. The "Village Mobed" recites the Initiation Poem in praise of the occasion. Meanwhile the guests shower the candidate with flowers, rice, eleagnus, and thyme leaves.

The candidate and the *vars-bearer* enter the *Yazashn-gâh*. They keep the crown and the *vars* in a corner. They are joined by two other mobeds. These four persons and the mobeds seated outside the *Yazashn-gah* are united by a *koshti*. The group recites the Yasna from section one to nineteen.

The entire Initiation ceremony with its intervals lasts for four days. The candidate recites the Yasna on each of the four mornings and recites the Afaringan in the afternoons. After the conclusion rite, the newly ordained mobed can now participate with other mobeds in all the religious matters and rituals for one year. After that, he is permitted is to practice on his own.

*Translated and condensed from "Marâsem-e Mazhabi va Adab-e Zartoshtiân (Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Zoroastrians) by the late Mobed Ardeshir Azargoshasb (President of the Mobeds Council, Tehran), Tehran, 2nd. Ed. 1979 (in Persian).

Note: The Iranian mode has only one grade for its Mobedship as against the Parsi Navar and Martab. The Iranian Mobeds are generally much more informed on the Zoroastrian Religion. Compared to Parsi rituals, the Iranian mode is much simple. Bareshnum is not practiced. Initiation is performed as an adult and at a well-experienced and mature age. The hereditary condition has been relaxed and the laity can become para-Mobeds and Mobeds. Although, to the best of knowledge, no female has been initiated so far into Mobedship, the door has been opened for them to enter, first a pre-para-Mobed, then para-Mobed, and then Mobed. The recital of the Avesta and Pazand is by rote and rituals by practice.

Avesta and Pahlavi are taught in all the universities of Iran and in certain (associations) anjomans. Iran boasts of the largest number of Avesta, Pahlavi, and Zoroastrian Studies students and scholars—Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians—in the world.

Avestan Mode

The Gathic texts, particularly the Gathas and the Haptanghaiti, show that there was no profession as priesthood under any name during the Gathic period. In fact, Zarathushtra overthrew the professional priests who had plagued the society. Zarathushtra himself was chosen as the *Ahu* (Leading Lord) and *Ratu* (Righteous Guide). He was the Divine *Mâñthran* (Thought-provoker). Others were chosen as *ratus* of house, settlement, district, and land, strictly according to their qualifications. Those engaged in teaching, preaching, and spreading the Message were *mâñthrans*.

The priestly profession and those of warriors, agriculturists, and artisans are a later introduction or a reformed re-introduction into the Zoroastrian order.

According to the Aerpatisân (Sacerdotal Code), which presents an older stage of post-Gathic Zoroastrianism, a priest was generally not a priest by occupation. He or she only officiated when called upon to do so. The Vendidad, a later composition, states that an ordinary professional priest led a simple life. He was easily satisfied, even with a piece of bread, and was a contended person¹. A few wandered teaching and preaching; others fed themselves at the laity houses.² Some rich homes had their own domestic priests.³ Members of a royal house were told to treat the priests as their own children and give them good food, a sign that some were not treated well.⁴ His usual implements for rituals were *ashtra* (whip), milk-bowl, *paitidâna* (mouth-veil), *khrafastraghna* (for killing noxious animals), *sraosho-charana* (flogging instrument), strainer, standard mortar, haoma cups, and baresman twigs.⁵ One may take a careful note of the

¹ Vendidad 13.45

² Vendidad 13.22

³ Vendidad 3.1

⁴ Yasht 24.9

⁵ Vendidad 14.8

absence of some of the implements used in modern rituals and vice versa, and how the Avestan priest went armed to punish the faulty and kill the noxious.

The Vendidad cautions that one should not recognize as an athravan a person who pretends to wear paitidana, ceremoniously girdles a koshti, takes a flog, holds baresman twigs, and carries a whip, and sleeps throughout the night without venerating and chanting and does not learn or teach anything... “He is a liar”(18.1). Fakes, frauds, and priests-in-name-only were busy too!

Teaching and Learning

The Gathas show that Zarathushtra was the first teacher who established a system to teach, preach, maintain, and promote his divine doctrine. The foremost persons he chose to train to teach at his school were Kavi Vishtaspa, the brothers Ferashaoshtra and Jamaspa, and his cousin Maidhyoimaha (Song 14.14-17⁶). He composed his message in five metric patterns, perhaps in as many or more tunes, and gave special training to Jamaspa in mastering the message and passing it on to others. Jamaspa who, according to a certain tradition, later became his son-in-law and still later his successor.

The purpose of condensing the Message in measured meters was to keep them compact and intact, free from any possible interpolation; render them easy to be memorized; maintain their original pronunciations within the meters and tunes; present and preserve them in melodies which would encourage people to chant and sing them repeatedly—a very effective method of teaching the thought-provoking words. Time has proven that no one, until the invention of modern recording appliances, could devise a better way than that of the Indo-Iranians to “human-tape-record” the very words of the composer for a remote future. The Gathas are intact in Zarathushtra's own words and dialect. They were preserved, one must say, by the athravans who spoke a slightly different dialect and later by the Parthian and Sassanian priests who did not know both the Gathic dialect and the later Avestan variety. They spoke and wrote in Middle Persian.

Aethrapaiti, the Teacher

During the later part of the Gathic period, we see the *ratu* (Righteous Guide) hold a new title—*aethrapaiti*. It means the master of an *aethra* and therefore teacher. No satisfactory etymology has been found, but most likely, it is derived from *â + i*, to approach, to come near, with the agentive suffix of *-thra-*. Whatever the derivation, it means a school, a place of instruction. The term for the pupil is *aethrya*, belonging to school. The first person to carry this title is Saena, son of Ahumstuta, the sixth celebrity mentioned after Zarathushtra in the Farvardin Yasht list.⁷ It depicts his close association with the Prime Master Zarathushtra. *Aethrapaiti* literally means ‘schoolmaster, teacher, preceptor’. It is *herbad* in Pahlavi, *hîrbad* and *hîrbod* in

⁶ Yasna 48.14-17

⁷ Yasht 13.97

Persian, and *ervad* in Gujarati. Saena is said to have trained “one hundred disciples who taught on this earth”, a proof of the universal missionary work of the early Gathic period after the passing away of Zarathushtra. It is, compared to today's religious teachers, a fairly large number for a small growing community of the thinly populated world of those days.

In the Avesta, an *aethrapaiti* is the teacher who teaches the Gathas and its philosophy only. The disciple took at least three years to finish his or her education. He or she worked hard from before dawn till late morning and again in the afternoon till late in night, to learn the lesson.

Any Zarathushtrian could become a religious teacher. All it required was that the candidate should be the “most aspirant” member of the family, that he or she did not deprive the family of its income, that he or she was unanimously chosen to become an *aethrapaiti*. Age did not matter. He or she could be the oldest or the youngest in the family. If he was a partner in a property with another person, he had to be chosen by the people concerned to take up the task. He could accept the new profession only if he did not harm the economics of the partnership. Both man and woman could assume the office of *zaotar* or any of the assistants. When called upon to perform a ritual, a husband and wife engaged in earning their livelihood from their regular occupation, had to decide which one of the two could economically be spared to attend to the task. A wife, if required, could help another male officiant even without the consent of her husband. One could even take a competent child to assist one in the performance. A rare example of equality of sexes, a high regard for competency, and a great sense of priorities, indeed.⁸

The Aerpaitistan calls the person thief, even a robber, who takes a woman to assist him in a ritual but with an ultimate intention of seducing her. Sexual harassment is nothing new. It also gives details on how far one can take a child without the consent of the parent, but it has no words on barring a woman from officiating during menses, pregnancy, or immediately after birth, or of a male becoming polluted through wet dream. In fact, with the exception of the Vendidad, no other text speaks of such “pollutions”, not even the Yashts that prohibit specific persons from partaking their oblations. Evidently, the non-Vendidad school did not consider these natural occurrences to be polluting.

When did the education start? The Aerpaitistan and the Vendidad would welcome it at any age. However, the assistance of a competent child in a ritual shows that there were people who started early with their education. Greek sources on the education of the royal young say that it began at the age of seven and continued until the age of seventeen.⁹ This could also be a clue for an early start. The teacher (*aethrapaiti*) or the pupil (*aethrya*) could be a male or female.¹⁰ The teacher was loved and respected.¹¹

A person had to study for three years under the guidance of a competent teacher in order to acquire the proper knowledge and understanding of the texts. The pupil had to study hard during the first and last parts of the day and again during the first and last parts of the night. He could only rest during the middle parts of the day and the night. He followed the routine “until he can

⁸ See Aerpaitistan & Nirangistan 1-37; Vendidad 4.45

⁹ Zoroastrian Civilization p.225

¹⁰ Aerpaitistan and Y 26.7-8, Y 68.12

¹¹ FrD.4

say all the words which former teachers (aethrapaitis) have said.”¹² The texts to learn thoroughly were the Gathas and the Haptanghaiti. They comprise only .069 (1/14th) of the bulk of the extant Avestan texts and .024 (1/41st) of the estimated bulk of the twenty-one nasks of the Sassanian canon.

It shows how long it took to master a short but very valuable volume. The teaching consisted of understanding, memorizing, reciting, chanting, singing, discussing, deliberating, and practicing the Gathic Message. The three-year time shows how deep one had to learn the thought-provoking Message of Zarathushtra. That is why Aban Yasht describes a competent priest as “a person of debate and discussion, thoughtful, artful, indeed the thought-provoking message personified.”¹³

It may be kept in view that, in those days, the Avestan language was the mother tongue of the teacher and the student. The pupil fully understood what was taught and discussed. Furthermore, there was a question and answer period to encourage a pupil to be a debater.

The Avesta or the relevant Pahlavi commentaries have no data on the initiation of a pupil into a priest. But such an important task could not be completed without an initiation. There was definitely one, most probably a simple and solemn one performed between the teacher and the initiate/initiates. Unless one accepts the traditional initiation to be an elaborated form of a simpler ceremony, one should come down a number of centuries to turn to Greek sources to give us a description of the initiation of a west Iranian Magi in the year 160 CE.

It commenced, according to Lucian (Greek Lukianos) in *Necymantia*, on a new moon day and continued for full twenty-nine days. Each day, the initiate took a morning bath while the teacher, facing the rising sun, recited holy texts. He looked into the face of the pupil thrice during his recitation. The two ate nothing but fruit and drank nothing but milk, honey, and water. They slept outside in the open. The last bath was by the master in a running stream. The initiate was perfumed and then given the priestly robes.¹⁴

Ritual Prayers

The Gathas and their supplements in the same dialect have hardly any elaborate rituals. They show that the faithful, individually or collectively, faced a fire-altar and chanted from the Gathas and the Haptanghaiti in a devotional posture. As far as the Later Avesta is concerned, the only ritual mentioned in the *Nirangistan* and alluded to in other parts, is a prototype of the present “Yasna” ceremony of preparing the haoma drink along with its sacrificial meat and baresman twigs. The only difference is that then the prayer texts were the Gathas and Haptanghaiti and now we have the entire 72-sections of the Yasna and more.

¹² V 4.45

¹³ Yt. 5.91

¹⁴ Aerpatastan and Nirangastan, Introduction page xxxi)

Although the Vendidad speaks in detail on purification baths and rites for pollution through dead matter and the disposal of the dead, neither it, nor any other text, defines any ceremonies or the functions of a priest at birth, initiation, marriage, or death. Relevant Pahlavi commentaries also do not elaborate. Tradition is the only guide, and it surely has changed and changes with the passage of time.

The reason may be as simple as this: Other parts of prayers were either still not composed, or if composed (which is much more probable), were not incorporated into a formalized form of rituals. In fact, the Sassanian division of the nasks places the Vendidad and the Yashts¹⁵, some forming a part of daily prayers at present, in the Datik category of the administrative wing of the state. The Vispered and non-Gathic parts of the Yasna were evidently parts of the Hadhamanthrik category which contained supplements to the Gathic and Datik categories. This gives us a clue as to where other texts stood vis-a-vis the Gathic texts placed together in one volume under the name of Stot Yasn.

A Hereditary Office?

There are no indications in the Avesta that show the office was hereditary and that people of other professions could not join this particular profession. Had it been so, there would have been a prohibition to accept a warrior or an agriculturist in the rigid circle. To draw a parallel, Hinduism is very explicit on this point. The very absence of a commandment making priesthood a closed circuit is proof enough to make the profession an open one.

There are a number of Avestan passages, which show that one was free to choose to become a priest. The Vendidad says, “Should a person of the same faith, friend or brother, approach another for goods, wife, or knowledge, he should be given what he requests for. Let him who wants knowledge, be taught the holy word... (during regular parts of day and night)... until he learns all the words taught by former teachers (aethrapaitis).”¹⁶ As already cited from the Aerpatistan, the office was not confined to any sex or age. The only recommendation made was that the most aspiring person of a house becomes a priest and that too without jeopardizing the economic position of the house. Zarathushtra is shown in two late yashts as praying for King Vishtaspa, a warrior by profession, to have ten sons—three to become athravans, three warriors, three prospering settlers, and only one to succeed the father as a king.¹⁷ Haoma's curse on a fraudulent woman not to bear an athravan child makes the profession a general one. The Vendidad says that a person, who chants certain Gathic stanzas early in the morning, would eventually advance to know “the Gathas, the Haptanghaiti, and the discussions about them”, and grow into a thoughtful and artful personification of the thought-provoking message¹⁸, the very qualifications of a good teacher. The priest is called *dahma*, meaning ‘wondrous, genius’, a title that warranted one to be a real scholar of the lore. **Rote and parrot-wise recitation is unknown in the Avesta.**

¹⁵ The Yashts were referred to as the Bagn-Yasn (see Denkard Bk. 8 “Nask 14: Bagan-yasn”) – Caleb Goodfellow

¹⁶ V 4.44-45

¹⁷ Afarin-e Peighambar Zartosht.5 and Vishtasp Yasht.3

¹⁸ V 18.51

The Zarathushtrian Assembly's Position

The Zarathushtrian Assembly recognizes that every profession, which promotes human society, and which does not monopolize the office and/or exploit the people, is good and noble. It respects all scholars, priests or not, of other orders, Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians, for their mature knowledge of their respective and other faiths. What it does **not** recognize is the murmuring priest who goes by **rote** alone and does not know and understand what he recites and performs, and yet demands obedience and blind following from the simple, kept-in-the-dark laity.

And true to the Gathic tradition, the Assembly does not entertain a priestly class or division. It has proficient persons who officiate at religious ceremonies from birth through initiation to memorial; act as chief witnesses at, for instance, wedding solemnization; lead congregational prayers; and convey the Divine Message by practicing it for their own selves, teaching it to those who want to learn, and spreading it around the world. Any able person, male or female, may qualify on the concrete basis of his/her knowledge to be chosen and recognized as a *ratu*, a leader, *aethrapaiti*, a teacher, or *hamidhpaiti*, an assembly head.

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See “The Zoroastrian Priest in the Avesta” by Ali A. Jafarey, SPENTA periodical - Vol. 2, Nos. 5–6, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 and 2 - August 1992–May 1993, published by the Zarathushtrian Assembly, for full details