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# Beyond the Theosophical Paradigm: *Ilme kṣnum* and the Entangled History of Modern Parsis

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### Abstract

In the early twentieth century, an esoteric interpretation of Zoroastrianism known as *Ilme kṣnum* became popular among the Parsis of India. Although research on the subject is scant, most scholars suggest that *Ilme kṣnum* draws largely upon the ideas promoted by the Theosophical Society in India. By examining primary sources in Gujarati, the present article illustrates the interpretation of the Zoroastrian cosmology proposed by *Ilme kṣnum*. Through a comparative analysis of its main concepts and terms, *Ilme kṣnum* is historicized in the context of the relations of the Parsi community with the Persianate and Western worlds. By framing *Ilme kṣnum* as a reconciliation between Persianate and Western forms of knowledge, the present article looks at historical entanglements as resources for the Parsi quest for religious authenticity, placing Zoroastrianism in global religious history.

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## Keywords

Parsi – Zoroastrian – theosophy – esotericism – entanglement – *gholāt* – India

## Introduction

In 1906, Behramshah Naoroji Shroff (1858–1927), a Parsi gentleman from the city of Surat in Gujarat, began to speak publicly about a life-changing experience that he had in his youth. He claimed to have spent three years in a hidden village in Mount Damāvand, in Iran, where secluded sages (*ṣāheb delān*) initiated him into the esoteric understanding of Zoroastrianism known as “*ilme kṣnum*.” *Ilme kṣnum* can be translated literally as “science of bliss” as *kṣnum* is the Gujarati rendering of *xšnūm*, the accusative singular form of the Avestan feminine noun *xšnū-* (“bliss; gratification; recognition”), which is found in the Gathas (Y.48.12 and Y.53.2). In one passage of his first book *Jarhoṣṭī dharm samajavā māṭe ilme kṣnumnī cāvī* (The Key of *Ilme kṣnum* to Understand the Zoroastrian Religion), published in 1911, Shroff describes *Ilme kṣnum* as follows:

*te ilme kṣnum yāne kharekharī khuśālī āpnāruṃ kudaratnā pedā karnārñī pīchāṅ karāvnāruṃ jñān* (Science of Ecstatic Beatitude resulting from the genuine knowledge of the Creator) *che. ā te “ilme kṣnum” che. avastāñī cāvī “ilme kṣnum” che.* (“The Key to the Avesta is Khshnum”).<sup>1</sup>

*Ilme kṣnum* is the science of ecstatic beatitude resulting from the genuine knowledge of the Creator. This is “*Ilme kṣnum*.” The key of the Avesta is “*Ilme kṣnum*.”<sup>2</sup>

SHROFF, 76–77

After his public debut and the first talks in Mumbai and the Gujarati cities Surat and Udvada, Shroff soon gained numerous followers. Among them, the philologist Karshedji Rustomji Cama (1831–1909) was so interested in Shroff’s teachings that he chaired one of his lectures. Cama respected Shroff’s ideas even if he did not agree or understand all of them, as shown in letters exchanged between Firozshah Rustamji Mehta, a Parsi from Karachi, and Khudabax Edulji Punegar, Cama’s student and Avesta scholar. These letters confirm that Shroff earned quite an excellent reputation among Parsi priests and scholars

1 The English phrases included in parentheses appear in the original text.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

in Mumbai (Kekobad, 331–46; Kreyenbroek and Munshi, 250; Mehta, 142–55; Tavaría and Panthaki, 84).

In 1910, Shroff founded the *Ilme kṣnum* Institute to teach and lecture on his esoteric interpretation of Zoroastrianism. He also began publishing books and articles in the magazines *Phraśo-Gard*, *Jām-e-Jamshed* and *Sāṃjvartamān*. In 1927, with Shroff's death, the *Ilme kṣnum* Institute ceased to operate. However, his disciples continued to spread his teachings. The brothers Framroze Sorabji Chiniwalla (1881–1962) and Jehangir Sorabji Chiniwalla (1898–1973) promoted *Ilme kṣnum* throughout the mid-twentieth century, while Kaikhushru Navroji Dastoor (1927–2019) and Adi Furrokh Doctor (1937–2014) made sure that the teachings of Shroff reached contemporary Parsis (Hathiram 2013; Shroff, 3; Tavaría and Panthaki, 84).

Currently, *Ilme kṣnum* still counts on groups of followers in the Parsi communities of India, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Bahrain. Since 1911, a large number of publications on *Ilme kṣnum* has come to light. This corpus comprises more than a hundred books and several hundreds of articles composed mainly in Gujarati. Most scholars consider *Ilme kṣnum* as a religious movement whose beliefs are a mere reworking of Theosophical ideas. Historical contiguity, similarity of beliefs and correspondence between the narratives of the hidden masters are the main arguments in support of such a Theosophical paradigm (Boyce 1979, 205; Hinnells 1997, 68; 2005, 104; 2007, 263; 2015, 168–69; Hintze 2004, 156; Kreyenbroek and Munshi, 48; Luhrmann 2002, 871; Palsetia 2001, 264; Stausberg, 11, 123).

My analysis of Shroff's *Jarhoṣṭī dharm samajavā māte ilme kṣnumnī cāvī* (or, *Cāvī*, for short) suggests that *Ilme kṣnum* is a reconciliation between Persianate and Western forms of knowledge rather than a reworking of Theosophical ideas. In the next pages, I will briefly discuss scholars' main findings on *Ilme kṣnum* and will provide an overview of Shroff's interpretation of the Zoroastrian myth of creation. A comparative analysis between key concepts and related technical terms found in *Ilme kṣnum*, in Persianate religiosities, and in Theosophy will follow. In particular, I will point out homologies (*i.e.*, genealogical similarities/differences) and analogies (*i.e.*, functional similarities/differences) between different systems of beliefs.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the present article holds the correspondence of the semantic value of a concept

3 Borrowing homological and analogical comparison from evolutionary biology, Asprem adopts these two typologies for comparison in the study of esotericism. While homologies refer to genealogical similarities (*i.e.*, common ancestry) between two species, analogies indicate the emergence of functional similarities regardless common ancestry. For a discussion of this comparative methodology, see Asprem 2014, 3–33.

(the signified) and its related term (the signifier) as a homology, inasmuch as it informs the genealogical relation between *Ilme kşnum* and a given religious system. If such a correspondence regards only the term (or signifier) because the semantic value (or signified) presents alterations, then I hold it as a homology because it informs a genealogical relation. The correspondence of the signified described using a different signifier, instead, indicates an analogy as it informs the similar function that a concept plays in *Ilme kşnum* and in a given religious system, but does not prove a genealogical relation.

I will then historicize the main findings in the light of the Parsis' proximity to the British colonial power and of their participation in the Persianate transregional networks. In doing so, besides mitigating the risk of drawing ahistorical conclusions, the comparative analysis of concepts/signified and terms/signifiers will enable the identification of those conditions of possibility<sup>4</sup> that inform the emergence of *Ilme kşnum* (Foucault, xxii).

### **Scholarship on *Ilme kşnum***

Despite the meagre research on *Ilme kşnum*, several scholars, including Boyce, Hinnells, Hintze, Kreyenbroek, Russell, and Stausberg, have made important contributions on the subject. Their interpretations of *Ilme kşnum*, to some extent, are homogeneous and describe it as a religious movement whose beliefs are a reworking of the ideas introduced by the Theosophical Society, an organization aiming at reviving ancient esoteric teachings that became popular in modern India (Boyce 1979, 204–6; Godwin, 20–21; Hammer, 61; Hinnells 1997, 66–69; 2000, 192; 2005, 105; Hintze 2004, 155; Kreyenbroek and Munshi, 48–51; Luhrmann 1996, 75; 2002, 871–73; Palsetia 2001, 263; Rose, 211–12; Stausberg, 11, 118–23).<sup>5</sup>

Founded in New York City in 1875 by the occultist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91) and the military officer, journalist, and lawyer Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), the Theosophical Society relocated its headquarters to India in 1879. It promoted esoteric interpretations of local religions in a universalist fashion through lectures, public engagements, and publications. The activities of the society among Parsis started around twenty years before Shroff first became known. In 1907, under the leadership of Annie Besant (1847–1933),

4 Foucault intends a condition of possibility as a genealogical approach that relies on the coexistence of a set of conditions that make an assertion possible. This method is situated in opposition to the idea of a perfectly linear development of history.

5 Exceptions to these homogenous definitions are the propositions of Kulke (22), Jal (2013, 548; 2014, 271), and Russell (81–83), who define *Ilme kşnum* as a sect. However, this formulation is an attempt to remark the marginal aspect they attribute to *Ilme kşnum* in opposition to what they consider to be a “mainstream” Zoroastrianism.

the Theosophical Society became more politicized and identified itself with neo-Hinduism movements. Hinnells argues that the developments of the early twentieth century led to a decreased participation of Parsis in the activities of the society—yet, “the religious needs which Theosophy had met did not disappear” (*idem* 1997, 67) and were soon fulfilled by *Ilme k̄ṣnum* (Boyce 1979, 205–6; Hinnells 1997, 67–68; 2015, 168; Stausberg, 11, 120), remarking the historical contiguity between the two religious enterprises.

An additional element in support of the Theosophical paradigm concerns the similarity between the respective epistemological strategies and systems of beliefs. In particular, most scholars suggest that Shroff’s story of the Zoroastrian masters secluded in Mount Damāvand is an adaptation of the myth of the Tibetan masters with whom Blavatsky claimed to be in contact. Some scholars, however, do not discard the possibility that Hinduism, Sufism, Zurvanism, and the teachings of the Persian mystic and founder of the *Ābādi* sect (*kish-e Ābādi*), Āzar Kayvān (1533–1618), could have inspired Shroff’s ideas (Hinnells 1997, 67–68; 2005, 104; 2015, 169; Hintze 2004, 156; Kulke, 22; Luhrmann 2002, 874; Rose, 212; Russell, 90–93; Stausberg, 11, 119–22).

Current research into the system of beliefs of the *Ilme k̄ṣnum* suggests that its followers believe in the presence of an impersonal God, the concept of reincarnation or metempsychosis, a cyclical view of time, the existence of an individual astral dimension, the presence of occult vibrations embedded within the Avestan verses, and the existence of several planes of being (Boyce 1979, 205–6; Hinnells 1997, 68–69; 2005, 104–5; 2007, 263; 2015, 168–69; Hintze, 156; Kreyenbroek and Munshi, 48; Luhrmann 2002, 871–72; Palsetia 2001, 264; Rose, 212; Russell, 79–89; Stausberg, 11, 122–23).

### *The Zoroastrian Myth of Creation According to Ilme k̄ṣnum*

The first chapter of the *Cāvī* describes the way that *Ilme k̄ṣnum* illustrates the Zoroastrian cosmology as a set of natural laws:

*jarthoštī majahabnī aṃdar āpaṇā vakhšure vakhšurān ašo spītamān jarthušt sāhebe kudaratnā nīyamomāṃnā be bulamdmām bulamḍ nīyamo samajāvyā che, ke je nīyamone “mājdayasnī daen” tathā “jarthoštī daen” tarīke āpaṇe oḷakhye chīe. “daen” eṭle ke “kāyado,” ane teṭlā māṭe “hasti” māṃthī “nīstī” māṃ javānā mahān kāyadāne “mājdayasnī daen” nuṃ nām āpavāmām āvyuṃ che; yāne ke ek “urvan” (soul) potānī asal suḷṣm hālatmāmthī sthuḷ hālatmām je mahān acaḷ kāyadāne adhāre nīce utare che—the Great Law of Infoldment of Spirit into Matter—te kāyadāne āpaṇā majahabmām “mājdayasnī daen” tarīke oḷakhāvelo che.*

Within the Zoroastrian faith, two very sublime canons among the canons of nature that we recognize as “*mājdayasnī daen*” and “*jarthōstī daen*” are explained by our master Prophet of Prophets Asho Spitama Zarathustra. As “*daen*” means “law,” the name of “*mājdayasnī daen*” is given to the great law of going from the “subtle dimension of the cosmos (*hastī*)” to the “dense dimension of the cosmos (*nīstī*)”; or the descent of a soul from the own original subtle state to the physical state on the basis of the Great Law of Infoldment of Spirit into Matter, which is recognized in our faith as “*mājdayasnī daen*.”

SHROFF, 3–4

Shroff summarizes the teachings of Zarathustra in two fundamental laws of nature that he renders in English as the “Law of Infoldment (*mājdayasnī daen*)” and the “Law of Unfoldment (*jarthōstī daen*).” The choice of the terms “infoldment” and “unfoldment” metaphorically recalls the acts of folding and unfolding in the context of the deployment of creation into material existence and its successive return to the original spiritual source. Shroff explains that the “Law of Infoldment” illustrates how the creation becomes manifest (*i.e.*, in-folds) from its subtle into its dense and physical state, while the “Law of Unfoldment” describes how everything that exists in the physical world returns (*i.e.*, unfolds) back to its subtle state. These two laws enclose the main cosmological features of Zoroastrianism as interpreted by *Ilme kşnum* (Shroff, 78–79).

Shroff continues explaining that the “Law of Infoldment” contains the cosmological principles that rule the manifestation of the spirit into matter. This process also regards the descent of human souls from the spiritual plane to the earthly dimension. Shroff lists three secondary laws that govern the “Law of Infoldment”: the “Law of Vibratory Colours (*stot*),” the “Law of Universal Diffusion and Expansion (*aršo-takht* or *urū*),” and the “Law of the Eternal First Motion (*jarvān*)” or “*Primum mobile*” (Shroff, 1–11).

By describing the “Law of Infoldment” and its related secondary laws, Shroff introduces the concept of the “latent state of true consciousness (*ahu*).” He maintains that the understanding of this concept goes beyond the notion of existence, hence, it is inconceivable to human beings. In its primordial state, Shroff continues, such “latent state of true consciousness” emanated as an “ocean of light (*nur ul anavār*).” Thereafter, a “motionless wisdom (*majdā*)” and a “motile consciousness (*ahurā*)” emerged from this “ocean of light.” At this stage of the creation, the combination of the “motionless wisdom” with the “motile consciousness” led the “latent state of true consciousness” to emanate as the “fashioner of the whole creation (*ahurā majdā*)” whose purpose

was to remove “latent ignorance (*ḍravāo*).” After the apparition of *ahurā majdā*, the “latent state of true consciousness” emanated as the “unspeakable, unknowable and unthinkable divine oneness (*vāhede hakīkī* or *mīnoān mīno*)” (Shroff, 1–11).

According to *Ilme kṣnum*, a progressive sequence of emanations followed the first steps of the creation until the establishment of the four planes of the cosmos: the spiritual plane (*mīnoi*) formed by the empyrean and the zodiacal heavens; the planetary plane (*jūrmānī*) formed by seven heavens in correspondence with the seven celestial bodies (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the sun, Venus, Mercury and the moon); the elemental plane (*arvāhī*), which encompasses the elements fire, air, water, and earth; and the earthly plane (*jūsmānī*), which corresponds to the physical plane of existence (*aipī dakhyum*). The combination of the empyrean and zodiacal heavens of the spiritual plane with the seven heavens of the planetary plane constituted nine layers of heaven, which Shroff names as the “subtle dimension of the cosmos (*hastī*).” The combination of the elemental plane and the earthly plane constituted seven planes of material existence, which Shroff defines as the “dense and physical dimension of the cosmos (*nīstī*).” This whole mechanism of progressive emanations is governed by the law of nature called the “necessary existence (*Guj. ul vujub* > *Ar. al-vojub*)” (Shroff, 11).

The Zoroastrian cosmology described by Shroff appears as an articulate interpretive framework that interweaves the metaphysical and physical worlds. The myth of creation lays upon a homocentric spherical model that emanates from the “latent state of true consciousness” and progresses through several manifestations until those of the human, animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms. The cosmogenesis and cosmography of *Ilme kṣnum* are characterized by an emanationist view of the creation. Hanegraaff defines (105) emanationism as the manifestation of “souls or intelligences which are not newly created by God but pour forth from his eternal essence.” Likewise, Shroff illustrates the progressive manifestations of entities or states of existence as having emanated out of the “latent state of true consciousness” from the subtle essence to the dense state of matter. In doing so, Shroff’s cosmology differs from the *creatio ex nihilo* previously suggested by Robert C. Zaehner, James H. Moulton and Louis C. Casartelli, or the *creatio ex deo* proposed by Hintze and Panaino, among others (see Hintze 2014, 243–44; Panaino 2015).

### *Persianate Traces in the Cosmology of Ilme kṣnum*

The Zoroastrian creation and the related technical terms presented by *Ilme kṣnum* are different from the cosmology reconstructed by scholars from Avestan, Pahlavi, and some other sources. The textual sources that inform the

Zoroastrian cosmology are fragmented or lost, and it is difficult to provide its full description. Furthermore, the Zoroastrian religion has survived resiliently across the millennia and has spread beyond the Iranian plateau; thus, its myth of creation has been represented in multiple ways. Although some sources (e.g., Yt. 12) diverge, the extant Avestan literature and later Pahlavi sources (e.g., *Dādestān ī dēnīg* or “Religious Judgments”) describe the Zoroastrian cosmography consistently through a threefold division, probably inherited from Mesopotamian ideas. A significant variation to the threefold division is found in the Pahlavi compendium known as *Bundahišn* (Primal Creation), one of the best extant sources on Zoroastrian cosmology and cosmography. The *Bundahišn* proposes a division of the heaven in seven levels. Panaino argues that the cosmology illustrated in this compendium contains Ptolemaic notions that inform the Sasanian and post-Sasanian astronomical systems, showing that a mediation occurred between the theology of the Pahlavi sources and Greek uranology (study of heavens). In effect, Panaino continues (2019, 103–4), the *star ī a-gumēzišnīh* (“unmixable stars”) can be regarded as “a sort of level sharing some qualities with the *Primum mobile* and the *Empyreum*,” which are not Zoroastrian concepts (*Bundahišn*, 18–20; Panaino 2019, 63–109; Shaki, 55<sup>o</sup>–54).

Panaino’s observation about the presence of concepts hailing from Greek uranology in Pahlavi cosmography offers a key to understanding Shroff’s “Law of the Eternal First Motion.” In fact, Shroff adopts the concept of *Primum mobile*, too. This Latin terminology, which can be translated as “first moved,” refers to the Ptolemaic embrace of the Aristotelean geocentric system that places the celestial bodies rotating in concentric layers around the immobile earth. The two foremost layers of the general Ptolemaic system correspond to the *Primum mobile*, whose rotation drives the movement of all the other celestial bodies, and to the Empyreum (from Gk. *empyros*, “on the fire”), which represents the apex of the heavens. Parsis adhering to *Ilme kšnum* also incorporate the concept of the Empyreum in their cosmography by placing it together with the zodiacal heavens as a component of the spiritual plane (Greer and Lewis, 419; Shroff, 1–11; Tavaría and Panthaki, 18–164).

Although the presence of the concepts of *Primum mobile* and Empyreum in both *Ilme kšnum* and Greek uranology constitutes an evident homology or genealogical similarity, it cannot be conclusive of a definite Greek influence on Shroff’s thought. In fact, concepts associated with the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic schools of thought have extensively permeated the Persian Islamic cosmology. The ideas of the Persian polymath Ebn Sinā (980–1037), known in the West as Avicenna, represent a remarkable example of such a permeability. Regarded as one of the most influential Islamic intellectuals, Ebn Sinā believed



that time (*zamān*) “is a measure ... of motion, particularly the motion of the outermost sphere” (Griffel, 472) and that the *Primum mobile* was manifest in the foremost layer of the heavens. In this way, Ebn Sinā proposed a cosmography integrated with the Ptolemaic system, consisting of nine heavenly regions descending from the “necessary being (*vājeb al-vojud*)” and hierarchically divided in the heavenly layer of the *Primum mobile*, in that of the fixed stars, and in the seven regions associated with the seven planets (Nasr, 367–71; Razavi, 80).

Ebn Sinā’s interpretation of time as a measure of the *Primum mobile* is significant inasmuch as the technical term that Shroff uses to indicate the *Primum mobile* is the Gujarati word *jarvān*, which derives from the Pahlavi *zamān*. Although Shroff places the *Primum mobile* as one of the laws of creation rather than the foremost layer of the heavens, the successive planes introduced in the system of Ebn Sinā correspond to those forming the cosmos as described in *Ilme kṣnum*. Ebn Sinā’s fixed stars and the seven regions associated with the seven planets correspond to the Shroff’s arrangement of the zodiacal heaven and of the planetary plane. Moreover, Shroff replaces Ebn Sinā’s uttermost atemporal divinity (the “necessary being”) with the “latent state of true consciousness.” However, the concept of *vājeb al-vojud* is still present in *Ilme kṣnum* in the Gujarati shortened form *ul vujub*, which proceeds from the Arabic noun *vojūb* (“necessary existence”). Interestingly, Shroff describes *ul vujub* as the law governing the mechanism of progressive emanations which is analogous to the function attributed to this term by Ebn Sinā, though its cosmological nature is different.

As with the hypothesis of potential Greek uranological influence on the thought of Shroff, these correspondences alone cannot confirm that *Ilme kṣnum* is grounded in the ideas of Ebn Sinā. In effect, the concept of *vājeb al-vojud* as understood by the latter is found in the cosmology of earlier Islamic philosophers such as Fārābī (870–950). The same concept is also employed by Illuminationist (*eshrāqi*) philosophy to indicate the necessity of existence. Further, a similar deployment of the creation was presented by the Isma‘īli theologian Hamid al-Din Kermāni (996–1021), whose “insistence upon the cyclical nature of cosmic time” (Nasr, 375) and history characterized his work. Likewise, Shroff emphasizes the cyclical nature of time and formulates the existence of concentric layers of time (Nasr, 371–75; Razavi, 80; Shroff, 69–73).

The fact is that such a Ptolemaic view of the cosmos gained popularity among Islamic intellectuals and astronomers. One of them was the Persian polymath Abu Rayhān Biruni (973–1050), who adopted a cosmology similar to that presented by Peripatetic and Isma‘īli theologians, adding a sublunar region consisting of the four elements (fire, air, water, and earth). The tenth-century

cosmology of the Iraqi sect known as the Brethren of Purity (*Ekhvān al-safā'*) is also articulated around the foremost heaven, the heaven of the fixed stars, and the seven heavens associated with the seven planets. Nasr maintains that the structure of heavens, followed by the four elements and the three kingdoms (mineral, animal, human), has been developed and represented with relative variations during the fourteen centuries of the Islamic history. Among these variations, the Illuminationist philosophy developed by the Persian philosopher Shehāb al-Dīn Yahyā b. Amirak Sohravardī (1154–91) presented a cosmology based upon the concept of light and its emanations. Sohravardī held *nur al-anavār* ("light of lights") as the ultimate divinity whose progressive emanations generate the hierarchical layers of the creation, from its subtle to its physical dimensions. Nasr suggests that the Illuminationist creation draws upon the cosmology of Ebn Sinā (Nasr, 361–404; Meisami, 129; Razavi, 32).

The concept of the "light of lights" is also found in the system of the sect founded by Āzar Kayvān, known as the *ābādīs*, who rendered this concept in Persian as *shidān-shid*. The Ptolemaic cosmology also characterizes the *ābādī* myth of creation; the *Dabestān-e mazāhib* (The School of Creeds), a foundational text on the teachings of Āzar Kayvān, describes a creation starting from the light of lights that, in sequence, emanates the "first intellectual principle (*āzād bahman*)," the "first angel (*surōsh*)," the planets, and the fixed and heavenly stars. This cosmological deployment is characterized by correspondences between the movements of the celestial bodies and the earthly world, between the divine entities and the four elements, and between the spiritual world and human temperaments (Āzarsāsānī, I, 5–10; Corbin, 183–87).

The *ābādī* cosmography illustrates a cosmos made of planes of divinities, of (empyrean) intelligences, of souls, of celestial bodies, of the elementary plane, of the four elements, and of the earth with its four kingdoms. Interestingly, the *ābādīs* considered *mīnoān mīno* ("the spirit of spirits"), which is a Pahlavi construct indicating one of the appellatives of Ahura Mazdā, to be the highest gradation of the heavens where a soul can contemplate the light of lights surrounded by divine entities (Āzarsāsānī, I, 85–152).

The concept of "light of lights" in its Illuminationist and *ābādī* fashion is also found in *Ilme k̄shnum* to indicate the first emanation of the "latent state of true consciousness" in its primordial state. Shroff's concepts of *hastī* and *nistī* reflect respectively the Illuminationist concept of subtle and dense dimensions of the cosmos. Moreover, Shroff uses the term *mīnoān mīno* in a similar way to the *ābādīs*. In fact, he refers to it interchangeably as *vāhede hakikī* to refer to the third emanation of the "latent state of true consciousness" which is epitomized as unity and oneness. The terminology *vāhede hakikī* is formed by the Arabic nouns *vahdat* ("oneness, unity") and *haqiqā* ("reality, essence,

truth"). In Persian, *vāhed-e ḥaqīqi* ("the true unity") usually refers specifically to God. Interestingly, the Gujarati translations of the *ābādi* treatises published in 1904 for the Parsi community make use of the compound *vāhede hakikī*, which is defined as the real oneness (*Khīstāb Jaredast aphaṣār jendeḥ rod*, d).

*Ilme kṣnum* shows cosmological correspondences with Sufism, too. The Perso-Arabic term *‘arsh ō takht*, which Shroff associates with one of the secondary laws of creation, is a compound that proceeds from the Arabic noun *‘arsh* ("divine throne") and the Persian noun *takht* ("dais") and is a common Sufi reference to a locus of creation. A scholarly contribution that sheds light on Shroff's adoption of Sufi concepts and technical terms is that on the Ne‘matollāhi Persian Sufi order. De Miras found (41–42) that the followers of the order believed all the spiritual paths to be chosen according to the capacity of the disciple "for the journey 'from the world of the inexistence (*nīstī*)' according to the word of Shāh Ne‘matollāh" to that of "existence (*hastī*)." The association of the physical and the spiritual worlds with the respective concepts of inexistence and existence is an allegory widely used by Shroff. Furthermore, the idea of the journey of the soul forth and back from subtle to dense states is also found in other Islamic sources. In particular, this concept is part of the corpus that collects the works on alchemy, chemistry, magic, and Shi‘i religious philosophy of the Persian thinker Jāber b. Hayyān (721–815), whose belief in the descent and return of the soul into matter is central in his metaphysics (de Miras, 60; Nasr, 383).

The correspondences of *Ilme kṣnum* with the Illuminationist, *ābādi*, and Ne‘matollāhi systems and with the wider Islamic sources all point toward the religious diversity of the Persianate world. Asatryan and Burns evince from their research on the heterodox *gholāt* ("exaggerationist") groups that the belief in a sevenfold creation and the idea of a hierarchical system of gradations and stages were common among these religious expressions of the Persianate world. The cosmology of the *gholāt* also entailed an emanationist creation where a non-anthropomorphic god was associated with light. The consistency between the technical terms used by Shroff and those adopted by the religious currents of the Persianate world shows an incontrovertible genealogical liaison of *Ilme kṣnum* with the antinomian religious strand that arose after the Arab conquest of Persia. In fact, while different groups emerged in Persia after the fall of the Sasanian Empire in 651 and later on spread across the Persianate world, they all shared a similar set of beliefs as noted by Crone: the idea of a divine light, an esoteric interpretation of religion, the concept of reincarnation, and a cyclical view of time, among others (Asatryan, 145–46; Asatryan and Burns, 68–70; de Callatāy, 17–58; Crone, 220–326; Amanat 2009, 74; Bausani, 157–58; Daniel, 125–56; Halm, 7–26, 401–6; Milani, 123; Tucker 1975; 1980).

### *The Theosophical Society and the Parsis*

The main objectives of the Theosophical Society entailed developing occult abilities among its members, reviving ancient esoteric teachings, and establishing a universal brotherhood. In 1879, the Theosophical Society relocated its headquarters from New York City to Mumbai, triggering an enthusiastic participation of Parsis, to the point that, from 1880 to 1909, the first Theosophical lodge established in India appointed two Parsi presidents, eight Parsi honorary secretaries, eight Parsi treasures and fifteen Parsi honorary librarians. The activities of the Theosophical Society in India consisted of the study of Blavatsky's writings, classes on languages and religions, public lectures, and annual conventions. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books on theosophy were regularly printed. The Society's monthly journal, *The Theosophist*, began in 1879 and soon became a space for learned Hindus, Buddhists, and Parsis to express their ideas on esotericism (Campbell, 1; Chajes and Huss, 9; Godwin, 20–22; Johnson, 1; Wadia, 21–35, 113–15).

The construction of Blavatsky's authority within the Theosophical Society was largely determined by her alleged contacts with hidden Tibetan masters known as *mahatmas*. The idea of contacts with hidden sages, Partridge suggests (330–31), “was itself a product of Western Romantic and esoteric occulture,<sup>6</sup> informed by earlier Orientalist interpretations of Indian and Egyptian texts.” The alleged messages of the *mahatmas* were put into words in Blavatsky's influential *Isis Unveiled*, published in 1877. In this book, Blavatsky presented the idea that nineteenth-century scientific discoveries were already known to ancient sages, proposing a reconciliation of ancient religion with scientific modernity and metaphysics. Such a position was in line with the discourse of other nineteenth-century occultists, who, researching on psychic powers, were inspired by the advancements of electrodynamics and the theorization of the electric and magnetic fields (Asprem 2013, 410; Godwin, 21; Lubelsky 2013, 339–46; Partridge, 329).

In the nineteenth century, the progress of scientific research led to the separation between the natural sciences and the philosophical disciplines, fueling the polemical *Materialismusstreit* (“materialism debate”) in Germany. The publication of Darwin's theory of evolution provided a thorough interpretive framework for biological life, reinforcing the scientific discourse and challenging the way religion was understood. Scientists actively joined the emerging debate about religion and science. In this context, esotericism turned into an instrument to challenge materialism and mediate between science and religion. Spiritualism, mesmerism, and occultism became Western esotericism's

<sup>6</sup> This term refers to a milieu that integrates occult sciences with popular culture; see Partridge, 314.

expressions of this mediation. Such an approach, promoted by organizations like the Theosophical Society, reached the colonies and impacted Indian religions to the point that “esotericism widely advanced and promoted the tendency in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam to understand these religions as ‘scientific religions’” (Bergunder, 118). Contributions to such debate were also proceeding from officers of the colony, such as the British railway administrator and politician Samuel Laing (1812–97). In 1888, he published *A Modern Zoroastrian*, wherein he portrayed Zoroastrianism as a rational religion by means of comparison with scientific concepts. Laing’s book, interestingly, became one of the sources used by Blavatsky (Bergunder, 88–132; Ballantyne, 48; Chajes, 26–27; Hinnells 1987, 204–5; 2000, 175–82; 2005, 167).

Blavatsky’s teachings, forged out of Western esotericism, illustrated theosophical ideas on cosmology, the nature of invisible beings, and after-death states. Goodrick-Clarke shows how Blavatsky’s teachings gradually integrated Indian religious concepts with ideas drawn from spiritism, mediumship, mesmerism, alchemy, Hermeticism, Kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, and Freemasonry (Goodrick-Clarke, 261–307). The cosmology, as taught by the Theosophical Society in India, was a universalist synthesis of Asian religious systems combined with Western esoteric ideas, evolutionary theory, and race theory. The theosophical myth of creation is articulated around an emanationist notion, the idea of an unfathomable divine entity drawing upon late Vedic Sanskrit texts (e.g., *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*) and the manifestation of spirit into dense matter alternating its return from materiality into spirituality. In her writings, Blavatsky discusses how several solar systems, held as deities, form the planetary sphere, whose genesis is followed by the creation of the four kingdoms of the earth. Further, the cosmos is permeated by the *akāsa*, which Blavatsky describes as “the Universal Space in which lies inherent the eternal Ideation of the Universe in its ever-changing aspects on the planes of matter and objectivity, and from which radiates the First Logos, or expressed thought” (Blavatsky and Mead 1892, 13; Blavatsky 1888–97, 11, 13; 1, 113–14; Lubelsky 2013, 337–46; Campbell, 43–64; Santucci, 38–43).

In 1879, Blavatsky published her first article on Zoroastrianism in the first issue of *The Theosophist*. This text encapsulates the main narrative themes used later by theosophists in their writings published for the Parsi audience: the enchantment associated with ancient Zoroastrianism framed as a lost knowledge; the religious ignorance of Parsi priests of that time; the aggressivity of modernism opposed to the preservation of ancient wisdom. Western members of the Theosophical Society used to publish articles on Zoroastrianism in *The Theosophist* and some of them lectured to Parsis on their religion. The Orientalist perennialism of theosophy and the search for the common root of ancient wisdom drove both Blavatsky and Olcott to engage with the *Dasātīr-e*

*āsmāni* (The Heavenly Regulations) and the *Dabestān*, texts associated with the *ābādi* literature which theosophists considered as authoritative sources of Persian wisdom. In a lecture delivered at the Town Hall of Mumbai in 1882, Olcott defended Parsis against the perceived threat of reformism, disenchantment, and foreign influence, attributing the latter as the cause of the decline of all great religions. The founder of the Theosophical Society also attributed magnetic powers to Zoroastrian ceremonies and their related ritual tools (Blavatsky 1879, 19–21; 1888–97, I, 649–52; Hinnells 1987, 208; Olcott, 5–41).

The theosophical system of beliefs and *Ilme k̄ṣnum* enjoy a number of conceptual analogies: the emanationist view of the creation, the unfathomability of the supreme divine entity, the subtleness and density of existence, and the cyclical view of time. Nevertheless, these conceptual analogies are not framed in the same fashion, nor do they use similar terminology. For instance, the theosophical cyclical view of time is akin to Hindu cycles of time (e.g., *yuga*), an element absent in *Ilme k̄ṣnum*. Then, some theosophical interpretations of Zoroastrian notions contrast clearly with the teachings of Shroff. For instance, the duration of the main cycle of time in Blavatsky's teachings is twelve thousand years, while Shroff writes of eighty-one thousand years (Blavatsky and Mead, 383). These differences serve also to dispel the doubts concerning the idea that Blavatsky was inspired by *Ilme k̄ṣnum* in her esoteric interpretation of the Avesta, as advanced by Reigle (Reigle, 11–16).

Blavatsky's and Shroff's choice of language provides further insights into their respective epistemological approaches. On the one hand, the technical terminology employed by Blavatsky and Shroff to refer to the conceptual analogies outlined above is totally different. Blavatsky drew upon the Hindu and Buddhist lexicon; Shroff instead adopted many of the technical terms associated with the religious strand of the Persianate world. On the other hand, Shroff presented Zoroastrianism as a scientific religion by framing its cosmology as a set of natural laws, some of which were based on modern concepts like the vibratory property of colors or the idea of universal diffusion.<sup>7</sup> Both Blavatsky and Shroff, in fact, employed English terms proceeding from the scientific milieu with an explanatory function, situating their respective esoteric systems as modern science.

Regarding the hypothesis that Shroff's Zoroastrian masters are an adaptation of Blavatsky's Tibetan masters, the narrative of hidden Persian sages who were guardians of ancient wisdom was present in the esoteric milieu long before the establishment of the Theosophical Society. In fact, back in the twelfth

7 The idea of universal diffusion is probably inspired by the laws of diffusion derived in 1855 by the German physician and physiologist Adolf Eugen Fick (1829–1901).

century, Sohrevardi claimed to have drawn upon the wisdom of Persian sages to conceive his Illuminationist philosophy. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, authors like Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535), Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), and Gemistus Pletho (1355–1452) popularized the idea of Persian sages as a source of ancient wisdom, turning Zarathustra into the originator of the magical tradition. During the same period, ancient Persian sages inspired the dream visions of Āzar Kayvān. In reality, Shroff's myth of the *sāheb delān* embodies a narrative that is much wider, in time and space, than that of Blavatsky's *mahatmas*. Thus, the Iranian masters who initiated Shroff into *Ilme k̄şnum* cannot be considered a mere adaptation from theosophy (Partridge, 314–31; Walbridge, 92–104).

### *Parsis between the Western and Persianate Worlds*

During the nineteenth century, having become one of the preferred trade partners of the British, the Parsi community enjoyed a high degree of proximity to the colonial power. Besides playing a significant role in commerce, Parsis—more than other communities—were exposed to Western influence, often occupying central roles in the social and political scene of Mumbai and Gujarat. However, such proximity also created challenges. The missionary John Wilson (1804–75) arrived in Mumbai in 1829 through the Scottish Missionary Society. The focus of his proselytizing activities were the Hindu, Muslim, and Parsi communities. Two years later, in one of his first publications, Wilson raised doubts and highlighted inconsistencies (234) regarding Zoroastrian cosmology, labeling the worship of fire and water as a deviance from the monotheism he preached. Over the following years, Wilson launched further attacks on Zoroastrianism, triggering heterogeneous responses in the Parsi community that showed the absence of a cohesive theology and the lack of priestly authority. The missionary's efforts did not achieve great success in terms of conversions. Nevertheless, his attacks exposed the religious vulnerability of the Parsis, questioning the knowledge of Zoroastrianism among its followers and challenging their religious identity. In this context, Parsis began their quest for authentic Zoroastrianism, advancing competing interpretive claims about their religion and favoring the emergence of a hermeneutical polyphony (Albuquerque, 1–145; Boyce 1990, 132; Dobbin, 23; Green 2015, 51; Palsetia 2001; 2006; Wilson, 234).

At the same time, British and Russian imperialist pressure, combined with the decentralized power of the shah and a weakened economy, triggered the rise of a nationalist discourse in Iran. Figures such as Mirzā Malkom Khān (1833–1908), who “aspired to the universal values of scientific progress, human rights, and tolerance” (Amanat 2017, 319), and Jamāl al-Din Afghāni (1838–97),

whose proposition to defeat the European threat was that of advancing a political nationalization of Islam, contributed greatly to the emerging discourse. These two approaches were later synthesized by Mirzā Āqā Khān Kermāni (1854–97), whose anti-Islamic nationalism advocated a glorification of the ancient Iranian past. This discourse, which eventually led to the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11), constructed an idealized vision of the pre-Islamic past, while offering the West as an example to be followed in order to modernize the country (Amanat 2017, 315–86; Tavakoli-Targhi).

In this context, the Zoroastrian religion and iconic Persian literary works, including Sohravardi's writings and *ābādi* treatises, provided a framework for intellectuals like Mirzā Fath-'Ali Akhundzāda (1812–78) and Mirzā Āqā Khān Kermāni to venerate the mythical past of their homeland. By placing Iran at the center of Persian history, the *ābādi* literature rewrote Iranian historiography and held "pure" Persian—devoid of Arabic loanwords—as a language superior to Arabic. Having acquired the value of "national artifacts" (Marashi, 60), the *Dasātīr* and the *Dabestān* became part of the myth narratives to be circulated and exported on a mass scale. In fact, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the introduction of printing press and of the telegraph, the construction of railways, and the building of steamships accelerated the circulation of people, writings, and ideas throughout the Persianate world. Both Mumbai and Gujarat became important intellectual nodes of the transregional networks of this vast area. Publishing houses, particularly those established in Mumbai and owned by Parsis, "published more Persian books than their counterparts in Iran" and "Persian publications ... outnumbered those produced in other languages" (Tavakoli-Targhi, 9). Translations in vernacular, including Gujarati, greatly favored the spread of Persian literature. For communities in India, this implied a wider access to religious texts that began to replace the priestly authority and offered new perspectives on the interpretation of sacred books (Ahmadi, 75–84; Albuquerque, 50–145; Green 2011, 93–94; Tavakoli-Targhi; Walbridge, 105–7).

These factors, together with the attention of influential scholars like William Jones (1746–94) and the mediation of Parsi emissaries like Mollā Firuz (1758–1830)<sup>8</sup> and Māneḳji Limji Hāṭariā (1813–90),<sup>9</sup> led to the dissemination of

8 In 1768, Mollā Firuz and his father Kā'us Jalāl participated in the Parsi expedition to Iran that was documented in the last *Revāyat* (Story), an exchange of letters between Iranian and Indian Zoroastrians on religious matters. Mollā Firuz brought a copy of the *Dasātīr* to India and published its first translation into English in 1818. Fluent in Persian and holding Iran as the land of religious authority, he personified fully the Indo-Persianate identity; see Sheffield, 20–27.

9 A wealthy merchant, Hāṭariā contributed significantly to the uplifting of Iranian Zoroastrians by lobbying successfully on behalf of the Society for the Amelioration of the



Persian religious literature in India, especially among the Parsis who extolled their ancestry in Iran. In those years, Mumbai and Gujarat were fertile terrains of exchange for religious beliefs coming from Central Asia. Islamic theologians, Sunni Memons, Cheshti, Sohravardi, Jonaydi, Naqshbandi, and Shattāri Sufi orders, as well as the Ismaʿili Khoja and Bohra communities<sup>10</sup> with their numerous offshoots, had and still have a remarkable presence in Gujarat. What is more, in the nineteenth century, a great deal of manuscripts containing magic conjurations, Islamic incantations, magic squares, and numerological formulas circulated in Mumbai. Parsis were exposed to itinerant Persianate religiosities, especially considering that many Muslim communities were settled in urban centers like Surat and Mumbai, where Parsis represented the elite (Green 2011, 190–96; Ahmed and Pourjavady, 606–24; Engineer, 1–15; Ballantyne, 18–55; Marashi, 56–85; Metcalf and Metcalf, 43; Partridge, 314–31; Tavakoli-Targhi, 77–112; Walbridge, 92–104; Zia-Ebrahimi, 447–52).

By virtue of their direct tie with Iran, the Parsi community became a natural recipient of elements promoted by the emerging Iranian nationalism. As it happened for Mumbai's Muslim community, the wider access to religious texts replaced the authority of the priestly class that, unable to provide an adequate response to the attacks of the Christian missionaries, was progressively losing its prestige. Parsis gained easy access to the numerous expressions of the Persianate religious strand which offered alternative religious frameworks. The transregional networks of Persianate world, in particular, those in Gujarat, abounded with ideas associated with *gholāt* religiosities, the Illuminationist school, Sufism, Ismaʿilism, Islamic occult sciences, and related esoteric strands. In the context of the emerging hermeneutical polyphony of the Parsi community, the Persianate provenance and the Persian language endowed these religious ideas with a layer of authenticity, turning them into valuable resources for Parsis to construct competing claims of authenticity.

## Conclusions

In the second half of the nineteenth century, technological advancements and the widespread use of Persian language impacted significantly the mobility of

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Conditions of the Zoroastrians in Persia for the abolition of the *jezya*, the annual poll-tax paid by Zoroastrians and other non-Muslim minorities living in Iran. Hāṭariā embodied the Western-educated Parsi whose mission was to bring back the ancient Zoroastrian glory of his Iranian brethren, fallen from grace since the Islamic conquest; see Marashi, 61–63; Sheffield, 28–38.

10 Nezāri and Mostaʿli Ismaʿilis are respectively known in India as Khojas and Bohras; see Engineer, 26.

people, goods, and ideas across the Persianate world, driving the massification of Persian texts that were printed mainly in India. Many of these texts were translated into vernacular idioms, including Gujarati. The combination of technology, Persian language, and translations into the vernacular accelerated the diffusion of new religious ideas, turning Mumbai and Gujarat into hubs of the process of religious exchange going on across the Persianate world. This process facilitated the spread of narrative elements of Iranian nationalist discourse such as the veneration of the pre-Islamic past and the use of the language as an instrument of dissociation from the Arabo-Islamic sphere.

In the same period, the Parsis' association with British colonial power increased the exposure and permeability of the Zoroastrian community to West, resulting in the acceptance of its values, customs, and norms, and in the adoption of its forms of knowledge. Together with the colonial sciences, esoteric beliefs from Western organizations like the Theosophical Society, the nationalist discourse of Iran, and religious ideas circulating across the Persianate transregional networks provided Parsis with resources to meet their demand for authenticity, triggering the emergence of groups which distinguished themselves on the basis of distinctive hermeneutical strategies.

The historical contiguity and the suggested similarity between epistemological strategies and systems of beliefs of theosophy and *Ilme k̄şnum* have led scholars to consider the teachings of Shroff as a reworking of theosophical ideas. Nevertheless, rather than framing *Ilme k̄şnum* as an alternative to the Theosophical Society because the latter experienced a decline of Parsi membership—that is, an argument of historical contiguity—the evidence discussed in this article shows that Shroff's teachings are the result of a quest for religious authenticity that emerged in the Parsi community of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead of being considered an emulation of Blavatsky's *mahatmas*—that is, an argument of similar epistemological strategy—Shroff's *sāheb delān* corresponds to the narrative of “the Persian guardians of ancient wisdom” developed long before the establishment of the Theosophical Society. Regarding the similarity between theosophy and *Ilme k̄şnum*—that is, an argument of similar systems of beliefs—while the archival research I conducted in India between 2019 and 2020 did not result in the identification of specific sources which could have directly inspired Shroff, the terminology found in *Ilme k̄şnum* enjoys distinct and incontrovertible genealogical similarities with the antinomian religious strand of the Persianate world, broadly conceived.

What theosophy and *Ilme k̄şnum* shared was the adoption of Western explanatory models for the legitimation of their esoteric systems, placing

them as mediators in the debate about religion and science. Tavakoli-Targhi argues (116–23) that, when the nationalist discourse began portraying *vatan* (“homeland”) as a decaying territory, the acquisition of *‘elm* (“knowledge”) in a European scientific fashion was portrayed as the solution for the reestablishment of the past glory. As the mediation between the nationalist discourse and the appropriation of European forms of knowledge situated science and modernity within the illustrious pre-Islamic past, so too *Ilme k̄şnum* and theosophy placed their esoteric systems as a scientific knowledge proceeding from ancient times, offering their followers an *‘elm* as a way to rescue the *vatan*, which was undermined by colonial modernity.

Expanding on the existing literature, the present article aims to further the understanding of *Ilme k̄şnum* as an expression of the hermeneutical polyphony that gradually developed in the Parsi community. Shroff advanced an epistemological reconciliation between religion and science, between ancient and modern, and between Persianate and Western forms of knowledge in the same way the Iranian nationalist discourse and Western esotericism did at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Building on the concept of “Persianate world” as an analytical category that enables research in Persian-speaking area whose geographical and temporal scope is broad,<sup>11</sup> the present article sheds light on the importance for historians of modern Parris to look at the Persianate world in the context of entangled history. While the study of the impact of modern Parris on Iranian Zoroastrians has been scrutinized, the influence of the religious diversity of the Persianate world on the Parsi community is still underexplored. By acknowledging that “different understandings of religion were produced and constantly negotiated through global exchanges during the nineteenth century” (Maltese and Strube, 242), this article analyzes the agency of Parris in shaping the religious change that happened in modern times. In this regard, the diffusionist model according to which a monodirectional acculturation occurred from the West to the East tells us just part of the story. Instead, the study of the relations between the Parsi community, the Persianate world, and the West, I argue, has the potential of opening new avenues of inquiry, placing Zoroastrianism in global religious history.

11 Ahmed finds (83–84) “Persianate” as a primary marker of specificity problematic inasmuch as it overlooks the knowledge produced in languages other than Persian.

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