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**THE PEOPLE OF THE AIR
HEALING AND SPIRIT POSSESSION IN SOUTH OF IRAN**

In the Memory of Ghulam Husayn Sa'idi (1936-1985)

Iran has a cultural attitude all its own. It is Persian, but not as a matter of ethnicity. And it is predominantly Moslem, but with an entirely different experience of Islam than its brethren in faith. For all its seeming marginality in the world today, this is a place painfully alert to the world; it is where new cultural schemes are born in the wake of unimaginable human calamities, where world religions are hatched, and where people have always found a way to make convivial and compelling lives (Babai 2008: xi)

Iranian *zar* had not been one of my main research topics, although I had had direct observations of some of the *zar* spirit possession rituals during fieldwork in Bashagard of Hurmuzgan (1994-1996), an arid and exceptional area of the Persian Gulf which remains largely obscure to the eyes of researchers. My aim here is to translate integrally the specific chapter of Ghulam Husayn Sa'idi's book – *Ahl-i Hava* (The People of the Air, 1967) – where, for the first time in the history of Iranian studies, he introduces *zar* and its details (Sa'idi 1967: 44-64). Many researchers had previously quoted and even translated some parts of Sa'idi's book, but never before had an entire chapter been translated for use in the wider academic debate regarding *zar* in Iran. Therefore readers of this chapter should know, that for the great part this chapter is based directly on Sa'idi's observations, which I interpreted and explored with my own direct experiences in Bashagard, as well as with comparative data from other research done on this topic.

My chapter contains two major sections. In first part I present *zar* in view point of other anthropologists who observed this procession spirit ritual in other societies especially among Muslim communities. The second part of this chapter is dedicated to *zar* in Iran. This section begins with a brief history of black slavery and slavery trade in Iran. I think generally speaking *zar* is an imported believe and procession ritual which came to Iran via black slavery. Basic knowledge about existence of black slavery in Iran can help our reader to understand why communities who practice *zar* in Iran are mostly black Iranians who today are living in the south of Iran beside the Persian Gulf. This part will continue and finish with presentation of *zar* in south of Iran. Most part of this section is based on my translations and interpretations of Sa'idi's text. His own original text (in Persian) is not edited very well therefore I worked a lot on his words and also where it was necessary I added the ideas of other anthropologists including myself. I thus consider my chapter to be one of the first ethnographical treatments in English on *zar* in Iran, one in which I also attempt to trace some preliminary connections between *zar cult*, and the history of slaves and slavery in Iran.

Introduction

Anthropologists have long struggled with the problem of how best to conceptualize and account for the observable diversity of religious belief and practice in various Moslem societies and communities. This diversity has been a problem not only for students of Islam but for the Muslim community itself.

Ladislov Holy (1991: 4) proposes that in spite of the fact that Islam does not recognize any institutional religious authority or organisation entrusted with defining the 'official' religious view, 'the relationship between "official" and "popular" religion has not disappeared but has rather become more subtle and intricate.' This distinction has often been used to assess beliefs and rituals practices¹. Azam Torab (2006: 18) argues that 'the first, defined as an "official" or "orthodox" Islam, is associated with the learned scholars (*ulama*), who are conventionally men while the second implies a "local" Islam or "popular" practices and beliefs that are primarily linked with women, the illiterate and the rural.' Also, the relationship between religious beliefs and political attitudes among Muslim communities has recently been at the forefront of academic and public debate. The question of whether high levels of piety or religious attendance are associated with certain types of political attitudes and behaviour has been a major area of interest for scholars.²

After the Islamic revolution of 1978-79, within Iran, 'which is the only regime in the Muslim world that is directly ruled by the clergy', the place of religion in the public and also private area is restricted and guided by the Islamic state. Abdolmohammad Kazemipur and Ali Rezaei affirm that 'the state took over all formal institutional spaces of religious collective activity and has since drawn upon religion as the main cultural resource for political legitimisation purposes.' (Kazemipur and Rezaei 2003: 357) Also, under Islamic state, in the majority of cases most non-Islamic practices have been considered as serious threats for 'Shiite Islam' and, of course, seriously damaging to the 'existence of actual regime in power'.

Out of urban areas, especially among small-scale societies and pastoral nomads, the diversity of religious beliefs and practices in Iran are clearly different. It seems to me that members of such communities effortlessly 'juggle local and multiple identities – villager, tribesman, woman – with the broader identity of believer and to legitimize them all.' (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990: xiv). I agree with Holy (1991: 1) when he states that 'there are numerous ideological and practical accretions present in all Muslim societies which account for the actual diversity of Islam.'

In such a religious, cultural and political climate, a topic which did not, until now, develop seriously in Iran is popular healing practices and spirit possession ceremonies, in which, by the help of healers and mediums, illness can be cured. The position of orthodox Islam and Muslim states, including Iran, regarding these kinds of healing ceremonies is not clear and more research needs to be done in this field. According to Iranian law, every kind of healing is considered an intervention in medical matters; for this reason, formal advertising for any kind of healing is forbidden (Javaheri 2006: 179).

Much of the anthropology of healing, spirit possession in general and also among Muslim communities, has sought to explain it in terms of strategies aimed at overcoming socio-economic disadvantage, or at securing material or social benefit. Some of them interpret spirit possession as the means by which marginal actors in society, often women, gain some

measure of authority, agency and sense of community (Doumato 2000; Lewis 1998); in terms of charisma and strategies to gain legitimacy among other healers and clients (Bellér-Hann 2001; Lindquist 2001) or as the response of disillusioned, marginalised groups in post-colonial societies to incomprehensible processes of globalization, which leave them destitute while others around them prosper (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999).

Other anthropologists, however, have criticised such explanations as reductive (Boddy 1988; 1994; Kapferer 2003; MacPhee 2003; Nourse 1996). The analyst, they argue, Johan Rasanayagam (2006: 380) believes, 'imposes his or her own system of rationality and so fails to grasp the full significance of sorcery and possession practices. Instead they suggest that possession and sorcery should be examined in their own terms.'

If such non-orthodox and popular activities are based on Islamic beliefs and thoughts and performed during sacred months and rituals attached to such periods, they may be accepted. In her stunning film 'Standard-bearers of Hussein: Women Commemorating Karbala', Ingvild Flakerud (2003: 35) shows how a female healer in Shiraz, based on Sufi-Islamic thoughts, can open an official private practice for herself and become a popular healer among Shiite families in this city.³

But beside such Islamic (Shiite) healing ceremonies, performed mostly among urban societies, in Iran one can still find many healing and spirit rituals and ceremonies which have some connection with popular beliefs but which are not based on Islamic thought or religious texts. There are many reports by anthropologists and ethnographers who did their fieldwork around Iran during the last century where they mention the presence of traditional healers or local doctors in the shape of one religious man or woman (*mulla*).⁴ Many of these popular religious practices in the Islamic world and also in Iran (*cafbini*⁵, *falbini*, *ayinabini*, *jinngiri*, *raml- va usturlab*...) are attached to magic.⁶ Students of the history of religion have linked some of these magical practices in Islam with pre-Islamic Middle Eastern and East African customs.

One of the most notable of these customs is *zar* (Hentschel 1997; Savage-Smith 2004). Based on my observations in the field, I believe that *zar* belongs to one of the two kinds of popular spiritual healing practices among non-urban societies of Iran.⁷ From Abadan to Chabahar, different ethnical groups practice and perform *zar* as a spirit possession ceremony and healing ritual for curing sufferings that are created mostly by supernatural entities, in the majority of cases, *jinn*s. Some of these *jinn*s can penetrate the body of local people and change the nature of their spirit, their soul and consequently their normal life. After local beliefs, the only way to be at peace with such extra-human forces is to perform the *zar* ritual.

While we do not have much information or academic reports on *zar* before the Islamic revolution of 1978-79 in Iran,⁸ after this period, surprisingly, we start hearing more about this spirit possession ceremony.⁹ The Shiite state in Iran not only does not appreciate such non-orthodox and non-Islamic ceremonies, it also, as much as it can, ban it. Despite the fact that *zar* uses drumming, dancing and chanting as a means to cure an illness (thought to be caused by an external spirit which has penetrated the body of the patient), for the majority of its history it was prohibited by Islam in some Islamic countries (including Iran), branded as a pagan practice.

Today the only official way that *zar* healers and their groups can perform and show their activities with the permission of state and local governors is in the shape of folkloric music festivals, in which they should come with their group on the stage and perform their rituals as public performances. Of course, local communities continue to organise and perform their private *zar* ceremonies as a healing system based on spirit possession, but for the most part one can be sure that such activities will be private and far from public view. Under such clear religious and political pressure, it is unsurprising that the life of healers and their followers may be in danger if they become too exposed.

WHAT IS ZAR ?

Zar, which refers to both the beliefs and practices associated with a certain kind of spirit, is still best known as a type of *healing cult*. As far as research shows, people in communities of different ethnical origins, religious faiths (Muslim, Christian, Falasha) and geographical area are attracted to *zar*. Today there is a wide variety of beliefs and practices focusing on *zar*, not all of them entailing possession by the spirits. Also, there are varying indigenous uses of the term *zar*. For instance, it can be found to denote the hierarchy of *zar* spirits, or an individual spirit belonging to this group; the ceremonies focusing on these spirits; a person who is possessed by a *zar* spirit, or the psycho-physical result of possession by a *zar* spirit: malady, trouble, dissociational states, or general feeling of being 'out of sorts'; in sum: 'altered states or capacities.'¹⁰

Much of the debate until recently has focused on the origins of *zar*, on whether it was derived from an African or Middle Eastern source¹¹. There is little controversy among scholars today about the *zar* cult having been introduced into the Middle East during the last century by slaves from Ethiopia, where it is thought to have originated. However, this lack of controversy seems to be based on an unsubstantiated consensus rather than evidence. While there is still a general debate about the origins of *zar*, there is no doubt that it is an exported phenomenon that expanded in some coastal regions in southern Iran.

S. I. Rahim (1991) sees *zar* as an expression of psychological disorder, whereas I. M. Lewis (1991) prefers to consider it a therapeutic outlet for marginal members of society, especially women. While Michael Lambek (1980; 1993) has focused on *zar* as a distinct system of communication and knowledge, Janice Boddy (1988; 1989) considers it to be a meta-language, a type of counter-hegemony within the larger patriarchal society. Fritz Kramer (1993) believes that the richness and complexity of *zar* rituals and beliefs reinforce the argument that this is indeed a very old ritual system, and one which, furthermore, tells us a great deal about 'the whole spectacle of life with all its contradictions and problems'.

Boddy (1988: 12) also believes *zar* rite is a kind of cultural therapy; its curative powers derive less from a virtual experience of trance than from the entire possession context that renders it, and countless other experiences, meaningful. Indeed, an individual's experience of trance is largely constructed by its context. In short, the relevant issue in the case of the *zar* is not trance *per se*, but trance firmly situated in a meaningful cultural context-possession-having medical, social, psychological, and often profound aesthetic implications. Before considering these, the nature of the illness that signals possession remains to be addressed (1988: 12).

Generally speaking *zar*, in the sense of possession, is usually (though not exclusively) inherited. It is frequently passed on from parents to their children, or to a close relative, who in this sense 'adopts', or is adopted by, the spirit of their relative. This process may result in

certain physical symptoms or disorders reappearing in successive generations. *Zar* is also contagious and may strike at any time (Kenyon 1995: 111).

The *zar* as a *cult* is a relatively recent scholarly device which has been left undefined by most, if not all, writers on the subject.¹² Natvig (1987: 670) argues that this lack of clear definition has reduced the value of many ethnographic reports and much research on what authors have termed *zar* or *zar cult* since the reader is uncertain as to what the author really meant.

If the term *zar cult* is to make any sense at all, *cult* must be understood as a typology of religious organisation, and not as referring to cultic devotion (to *zar* spirits). According to Richard Natvig *cult*, as a typology of religious groups, designates a group that is at one end of a continuum of religious organisations, ranging from *cult* via *sect* to church. In general terms, *cult* refers to a small, often local, more loosely organised and more individualistic group than the others mentioned (*ibid*). A cult's beliefs and rites tend to make a fundamental break with the main religious tradition of the society in which it exists, without, however, being consciously schismatic. In fact, cults are often little concerned with doctrine and belonging to a cult is independent of allegiance to a particular set of doctrines, and does not preclude membership of other kinds of religious groups. Instead, cults tend to lay emphasis on religious rituals and practices, often of an instrumental kind aimed at the achievement of immediate, concrete results or benefits for the individual member, such as mental or physical healing, comfort, or personal ecstatic experiences, rather than long term salvational benefits (Natvig 1987: 670). With this in mind, *zar cult* may be prototypically defined as referring to a religious group of the cult type, where the basis of recruitment of members is *zar* spirit possession and where meaningful long-term relationships with spirits are cultivated by means of ceremonially provoked spirit possession on a regular basis. An individual becomes a member of the cult by virtue of an initially uncontrolled and, therefore, harmful possession experience, which is brought under control and turned to their advantage, or at least neutralized, by the individual's active participation in a *zar cult* group's recurrent ritual activities. A *zar cult* group is headed by a person who is usually possessed as well, and who, after a period of assisting a senior *zar* group leader, or through the direct intervention of the *zar* spirits, has obtained the specialized skill and knowledge of how to deal with the *zar* spirits (Natvig 1987: 671).

There are ceremonial and cosmological differences and the socio-sexual catchment areas, as well as the consequences of participating in the *zar cult*, vary from place to place. The aim of the cult, however, is the same: the curing of illness or misfortune caused by possession by a species of spirit called *zar*.

Very briefly, the theory of the *zar cult* is that there exists a great number of *zar* spirits, euphemistically called lords, masters, angels, or blessed ones. When disturbed they are liable to possess human beings, thereby causing some sort of illness or deviant behaviour patterns in the victim. It is possible, however, to come to terms with the spirits and this is the purpose of the *zar* ritual (Natvig 1987: 57). A person suspected of having been possessed by a *zar* spirit is taken to the local *zar* leader, usually a woman or man, who considers the circumstances of the affliction. To settle the case, the *zar* leader may then suggest a ritual diagnosis, during which contact with the *zar* spirit world is established. If the ritual diagnosis shows that the person is indeed possessed by a *zar* spirit, steps have to be taken to reconcile the spirit. One has to satisfy the spirit's terms for withdrawing the affliction. These terms, which are revealed during the ritual diagnosis, regularly consist of the victim's celebrating a sacrificial ceremony for the spirit. Furthermore, in this ceremony the victim has to wear special clothes, ornaments

and amulets, the types of which are decided by the particular spirit possessing her/him. In order to maintain the new relationship with the spirit, the possessed person has to renew the agreement with the spirit by repeating the sacrificial ceremony in accordance with this agreement, usually once a year (Natvig 1987: 57-8). Those possessed by *zar* spirits become members, by virtue of that possession, of *zar cult* groups that consist of a community of fellow sufferers, with a *zar* leader who is also possessed. The sacrificial ceremony can be regarded as a ritualisation of the introduction into a cult group of a person who has already been 'elected' by the *zar* spirits (Natvig 1987: 58).

Etymology of the term *zar*

The etymology of the term *zar* is obscure and I think today it is impossible to say precisely from where it comes. Also, it seems to me that the word has many origins based on different regions, religious beliefs and rituals. I think its meanings and functions have changed repeatedly over time and during its long diverse journeys.

One can also add another difficulty: the negligence of pioneer observers (who registered *zar* ceremonies) to the local languages and dialects to find out more about origins of the word *zar*. Many of them re-recount explanations which they heard from others who were mostly unfamiliar with local traditions and folklores. Therefore, we should not be surprised when we see that more acceptable interpretations and hypotheses regarding the etymology of *zar* came only at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Generally speaking, I think we can divide all of these hypotheses into two main categories. First, one considers the origin of the word *zar* to be from Africa, mostly Ethiopian sub-cultures, namely Abyssinian. The second category proposes that the origin of the word *zar* is somewhere among Arab speaker regions of the Persian Gulf. My observations would suggest that a combination of these two ideas is more accurate: that is, that the origins of the word *zar* remit to a mixture of African and Arab culture with a strong connection to North African Islamic beliefs.

As we said, to many scholars it seems that the word *zar* has Abyssinian origin.¹³ Enno Littmann (1950) collected a great number of Abyssinia magic scrolls in which the word *zar* occurs in the shape of *zârt*, *zârit* and *jâr*. Also, Stefan Strelcyn (1972), in his precious work on 34 magico-medical divinatory manuscripts from Ethiopia (with Amharic influence), shows that the word *zar* appears to designate a spirit or the head of a groups of spirits which caused illnesses. In this regard, many scholars, following Enrico Cerulli, suggest *zar* is an Amharic word,¹⁴ probably derived from the Cushitic supreme god, *djar* in Agau, which in Christianized Abyssinia became a malevolent spirit. 'The name is of non-Semitic origin, probably derived from the name of the supreme divinity of the pagan Cushites, the God-Heaven called in Agau *gar*, and in Sidamo languages: *Kaffa yaro*, *Buoro daro*' (Cerulli 1934: 1217).

But it seems that Kahle rejects this theory:

While Paul Kahle seems to have been undecided about the origin of the *zar* cult when he wrote ('Zar-Beschwörungen in Egypten'),¹⁵ he evidently was intrigued by Frobenius's observation of the strong similarities between *bori* and *zar* ritual and beliefs. After Frobenius's book had been published, Kahle wrote in a letter to Elisabet Franke that (it seems to me that here we have the key to the *Zar*).¹⁶ Four years later, Max Meyerhof wrote: (The *Zar* has formerly been traced back to Abyssinia; recently, Mr. Prof. Kahle has informed me that he will soon be able to present important evidence for its origin in Inner

Africa, especially Hausaland.)¹⁷ Kahle, however, never published the results of his investigations (Natvig 1987, p. 674).

Also, Seligman refuses the idea of Cerulli:

In Spiro's vocabulary of the colloquial Arabic of Egypt *zar* is translated by 'negro incantation' and no plural or derivation is given. It was suggested to me by an Egyptian that it meant 'visitation' and came from the Arabic verb *zâra*, 'the visited'. In the Sudan I only found the word *zâr* used to mean the ceremony, the spirits themselves being spoken of as *asaid*, 'masters' (Seligmann 1914: 300).

Other scholars who worked among Northern Sudanese spirit possessions report different etymologies regarding the term *zar*. Ahmed al-Shahi proposes the following:

...*zâr* (possibly from the Arabic *zâra*, to visit, though this derivation is disputed), which implies that when spirits desire certain things they visit an individual through whom these things are obtained for individual's benefit; and *zahar* (Arabic: *zahara* 'to appear'), imply that the spirits appear, commonly through dreams, and reveal their identity to the possessed and to the master of ceremony. In these regions *zar* also is referred to as *al-jâma'a* (Arabic: group) a term to indicate all the spirits and also known by term *asyâd* (Arabic: masters), indicating the power of the spirits over individuals (Al-Shahi 1984: 29-30).

There are some accounts from Somali that the word *saar* describes a state of possession by a spirit also called *saar*. This spirit itself (*saar*) in the Islamic setting, described by Lewis (1956: 146) as a kind of *jinn* whose malignant powers cause certain types of sickness.¹⁸ From Aden, Lidwien Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding (1996: 175) report that the term *zar* has been used as *zuhr*, which presents the custom of many Muslim women to hold harmless meetings which were simply a sort of social gathering whereby women meet to pass a few hours listening to small drums being played and sing songs.¹⁹ Other historical evidence leads to interpretations of *zar* as an Islamic religious fetish which helps to hunt the demons that attacked humans (Artin Pacha 1885: 185, n).

As regards the Arabic origin of the term *zar*, the earliest report is the work by Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1889: 124-8). Snouck Hurgronje argues that *zar* is not an Arabic word *per se* but originally came from Eastern Arabia, somewhere in the province of Oman. He states that the word also has a plural form: *zeeran*. Strangely, he goes on to say that he has been told that the word is Arabic and denotes a sinister 'visitor' (*zara yezuru*) who makes his or her abode and so possesses the victim (id: 124). Later, Samuel Zwemer (1920: 228) follows the popular Arabic etymological explanation which connects the word *zar* and the Arabic verb *zâra*. Also, John Walker (1934: 62) states that the word *zar* could come from the Arabic word *ziyara*, meaning visitation, inasmuch as persons possessed by demons are said to have been 'visited' by spirits (*el-assayad*), or it could have been derived from the town of Zara in northern Iran (i.e. unknown). It has also been suggested by Taghi Modarressi (1968: 150), Leo Frobenius (1971: 96), and Farrokh Ghaffary (1986: 92-7) that the word *zar* is Persian. Modarressi (1968: 150) states that the term *zar* was applied to the Iranian culture when it was introduced in southern Iran by African sailors from the southeast coast of Africa in the sixteenth century.

In contemporary Persian literature, the term *zar* has two main interpretations. The first usage is in the form of a prefix and complex verb (*zâri*): *zârikardan* or *zâridan* (*zârzadan*), which means crying, lamenting or mourning. The second usage is in the shape of a suffix adjective

which describes a 'bad situation or condition': *hal-i zar* (bad feeling), *kar-i zar* (act or work which ended badly).

Origin of zar

As Natvig (1987: 685) proposes, 'the ultimate origin of the *zar cult* is open to conjecture.' Historical evidences reports that the *zar cult* as a topic of research came to the attention of Western scholars from several fields and with different viewpoints after the second part of the nineteenth century. Not only most early scholars, such as Michael De Goeje (1890) and Theodor Noldeke (1890), try to work on this issue, but also later researchers until today try to find the origins of the *zar cult*,²⁰ which, it seems, is yet to be satisfactorily answered. It seems to me that the *zar cult* as a simple observation is mentioned maybe for the first time in a letter by Luci Duff Gordon (1902: 380).²¹ But Natvig (1987: 671), argues C.B. Klunzinger (1877: 395), who resided in Qusayr as a former quarantine doctor, was the first European writer who described the *zar cult* in Egypt.

Among the women *zikrs* are not indulged in, but the tendency to ecstasies is even much greater among the more nervous sex, and to gratify this inclination they have adopted a practice which is said to have been introduced by Abyssinian female slaves, and which gradually spread to such an extent that the government felt itself called upon to forbid it. Nevertheless, it is still common among high and low, especially in Upper Egypt. The *sar*, a certain *ginn*, is the powerful genie of sickness, who throws himself upon the women by preference (Klunzinger 1877: 671).

Later, in the second volume of his work, Snouck Hurgronje (1888-89) describes the *zar cult* as a female practice in Mecca (Snouck Hurgronje 1970: 124-8).²² Also, Goeje (1890: 480) and Noldeke (1890: 701) both reached the conclusion, independently of Klunzinger, that 'the *zar* is introduced from Abyssinia, most likely by the slave women.' Based on the reports of others, especially Klunzinger, Natvig (1987: 672) argues that the *zar cult* is a foreign element in the Middle East and brought to this area during the nineteenth and early twentieth century by slaves. Pamela Constantinides's (1972: 263) investigations of Sudanese oral traditions showed that many of the earliest remembered cult leaders were described as being Egyptian. However, 'Closer enquiry as often as not revealed that these were "dark complexioned" Egyptians, probably in fact the wives and descendants of Mohammed Ali's model army of slaves, recruited principally from the south and south-western Sudan.'

Along with the fact that we find no evidence of a notion of spirits called *zar*, or of the existence of *zar cult*-like practices, in any part of the Middle East, including northern Sudan, earlier than around the middle of the nineteenth century, it is reasonable to conclude that the *zar cult* was indeed introduced into the area, probably in the first half of the twentieth century by slaves (Natvig 1987: 674).

Other theories have occasionally been put forward, none of them able to challenge the older Abyssinian theory. These theories propose either an African origin for the *zar cult*, or a Persian one, or a combination of both. Thus, Frobenius, struck by the similarities between *bori* rituals that he observed in Hausaland and the *zar* ritual which he saw in Omdurman, suggested that both had their origin in a system of beliefs ultimately derived from Persia, which had spread throughout the grassland belt, from Abyssinia in the east to Hausaland in the west, due to an early Persian influence in the area via Nubia (Frobenius 1913: 561-4).

A double origin of the cult was proposed by Brende Seligman (1914), who suggested that the name *zar* and the belief in *zar* spirits had been introduced from Abyssinia, while its ritual had

been introduced by black slaves from south and south-western Sudanese tribes and derived from their cult of tribal and ancestral spirits. Another double origin theory combining an African with a Persian origin has been suggested by Modarressi (1968: 149). According to him, the name *zar* is Persian and was applied to the cult when it was introduced in southern Iran by black sailors from the south-east coast of Africa in the sixteenth century. All of these theories are marred by speculations, uncritical use of sources, or self-contradictions and must be rejected.

The *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Cerulli 1934: 1217) supports Dunca MacDonald and C. B. Klumzinger's contention that the word *zar* is Ethiopian in origin. Similarly, Simon Messing (1958: 1123) states that the *zar cult* is highly developed in Northern Ethiopia, with its centre in the town of Gondar. Also, in Iran the origin of the word *zar* is obscure. Although many scholars have carried out research on the subject, their interpretations are different and unrelated. Sabaye Moghaddam (2009) in the *Encyclopædia Iranica* classifies this activity as ceremonial, calling it a trance or healing dance: in some parts of Persia, musical exorcisms are performed to relieve those thought to be afflicted with evil spirits.

Zar and Gender issues

Generally speaking, most literature on spirit possession assumes that it affects women more than men, for women are less free, more disenfranchised and more in need of a proxy.²³ Many of these anthropological studies demonstrate that among non-urban societies, spirit attacks are most likely to occur when women are in transition from one phase of life to another. Also, many scholars explained *zar* as a kind of women's strategy for taking on privileges denied them in their un-possessed state, or for articulating subaltern positions on the established political order.²⁴

Historically also, most of the observations on the *zar cult* are almost unanimous in noting that the cult and its leadership were dominated by women. In fact, *zar* beliefs are found among both men and women, but practices associated with the *zar* ritual as an organized *possession cult* lie firmly in the hands of women (Kenyon 1995: 109). Thus, it is evident that at least at the time when the *cult* had gained enough popularity to attract the attention of outside observers, it was under the control of women. Such literature on predominantly female possession rites is particularly rich in examples from the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East.

According to C.B. Klunzinger (1877: 397), the *zar* leader was usually a slave woman. In an article published in 1885, Yacoub Artin Pacha mentioned a shrine (*zawiya*) in Cairo called *Shaykh Bidak*, where freed 'negresses' had used to assemble 'for delivering themselves to their fetish (*zar*) that consists to hunt the demon – which penetrated and attacked the body of the possessed person – by the help of music, and sacrifices of sheep.'²⁵ Also, at the turn of the century, Eugénie le Brun became acquainted with the *zar* ceremony when her Sudanese maid resigned because the spirit that possessed her disapproved of the sombre black dresses her mistress used to wear. Le Brun credited the 'negresses' with a predominant part in the cult and claimed that three-fourths of the women who considered themselves possessed by the devil ('le Diable') were black. She also referred to the *zar* leaders as black women and mentions one in particular; the aged leader of the most renowned cult group in Cairo. She was the freed slave concubine of a prince and spoke nothing but Turkish (Le Brun quoted by Salima 1902: 255-98).

Also, in countries situated in the Persian Gulf, female slaves evidently had a hand in the cult's leadership. Snouck Hurgronje (1970: 101) wrote about 'the *Sheikha* (female *zar* leader) and her slave girls, who must attend these functions with beat of drum and with a species of song

In this century, Fanny Lutton of the American Mission also described the *zar cult* in Muscat and referred to a 'Devil dancing' performed by black slave women (quoted in Zwemer 1920: 234). According to Dirk Dykstra, a member of the Arabian Mission in Bahrain, blacks and Arabs intermingled in *zar* ceremonies, while the Shiites of Bahrain did not mingle with others: 'the only outsiders they have with them are the negro musicians' (Dykstra 1918: 20). Lastly, Thomas Bertram (1931: 261) described the *zar cult* in the fishing villages of Oman and reported that the *zar* leader was often an old black woman. More recent observations from Bahrain (Holes 2000), Dubai (al-Zakari 1998) and Saudi Arabia (Doumato 2000: 170-84) also confirm the dominant role of women in *zar* ceremonies.

Most scholars who wrote after Sa'idi on the *zar cult* in south Iran have completely ignored the importance of gender issues in this procession ritual (Aghakhani n.d.²⁶; Modarressi 1968; Mirzayi 2002; Marsden 1972; Sharifiyan 2002; Boloukbashi n.d.; Riyahi 1977; Masudiyeh 1977 and 1985; Darvishi 1991, 1998 and 2001; Muhebi 1995; Safa 1988, Gharasu 2008). A documentary film made by Mehrdad Oskoui (2004), and also some parts of Mahmud Rahmani's documentary film (2007), are the only official visual representation where we can understand the importance of gender, especially the role of women in *zar cult* in south Iran. Oskuyi's film demonstrates why and how the majority of *zar* believers and participants in south Iran (Qashm Island) today are women who belong to the lowest classes of society. Here, we see clearly how women talk about their personal psychological and social problems in their society and with their family, especially their rapport with their husband. While most studies of *zar* show that most possessed patients are women, the masters of ceremonies and head of rituals can be both women and men. Also, in such ceremonies, in most cases, music performances are executed by a group of men and not women.

IRANIAN ZAR

As I mentioned before in this part of my chapter first I will present a brief history of black slavery in Iran as I think for first time it was via this maritime human commerce that *zar* arrived into Iran. And in second part I will talk in detail about *zar* ritual in Iran.

A Brief History of Black Slavery in Iran

Slave trading to the Persian Gulf began well before Islamic periods. Medieval accounts refer sporadically to slaves as household servants, bodyguards, militia men and also seamen in southern Iran and the Persian Gulf (Ricks 1988: 66). For historians of Iran and the Persian Gulf, the subject of slaves and slave traders is a relatively new field of research. There are virtually no published materials available in English or French about African communities in Iran, and Joseph Harris (2003: 325) states that he was also unable to find an Iranian who knew of any such study in Arabic or Persian. But Mohammad Bastani-Parizi (1961: 307-476) argues that the existence of towns and villages such as Zangiabad (a village built by Africans), Qala Zangiyan (Castle of Africans) in Baluchistan and Dah-i Zangiyan (village of Africans) in Kirman refer to an African background (slaves) in southern Iran.

Trade in the Persian Gulf was an ancient activity for the people of Persia and the Arabian Peninsula. With the rise of the Sasanids (A.D. 226-640), seafaring in the Gulf became an integral part of Persia's commercial and maritime activity (Ricks 1970: 339).²⁷ Also, the

predominance of Persians in the Gulf trade in pre-Islamic times is indicated by the many Persian words used by merchants and sailors of the Gulf during the medieval period.²⁸

The shift from Sasanian to Islamic hegemony in the Gulf had little effect on the economic structure of the coastal ports. The Arab invasions (ca. A.D. 640) of Persia and the subsequent turmoil along the coastal ports of the Persian Gulf brought a new and lasting dimension to the commerce of those regions, particularly during the later medieval period (Ricks 1970: 343). Persian merchants and ships from the Gulf continued to trade antimony, rugs and precious stones from Syria (al-Sham) and Egypt, along with woven fabrics, cotton, horses and pearls to India and the Far East (Toussaint 1966: 45; Lewis 1960: 87-8). Slaves, ivory, teakwood, ambergris, tortoise shell and gold continued to be brought from East Africa on Persian ships, while peppers, camphor and muslin, as well as other spices and piece goods, were brought to the ports of the Gulf from India and the Far East to be carried overland to the cities of Iran and the Fertile Crescent (Lewis 1979: 343).

From the ninth century onwards, Arab and other Muslim writers provide information on the movement of slaves from the black lands towards the North and the East – across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean to Arabia and Iraq, down the Nile to Egypt, and across Sahara to the slave-markets of North and Northwest Africa.

Abu Zaid (ca. A.D. 877-915), himself a merchant from Siraf, noted that Sirafi merchants visited Jidda in the Red Sea and the Zanzibar coast (Ferrand 1922: 130; Nadvi 1966: 130). Finally, Isfahani (A.D. 893-970) relates the report of Hasan b. Amr al-Sirafi, a merchant from Siraf, who visited the land of Kanam in the Sudan (Marvazi 1942: 54; Brockelmann 1943-44: 117, 221; *ibid.* 1937-1942: 117, 221). During the tenth century, Sirafi captains and merchants were actively engaged in both the Red Sea and India-China trade. Arab and Persian sources reveal that the Persians were still dominating trade around the coasts of Arabia as far as Jidda and the other Red Sea ports (Hourani and Carswell 1995: 79; Wiet 1955: 82-83). Historians and geographers did not indicate the composition of the population of Siraf in this period or its political structure, but it is known that Persians, Arabs, Jews, Indians and other national groups, including Africans, formed its population.²⁹ Al-Masoudi (A.D. 896-956) describes the route taken by the Sirafis to the East African coast as being a direct course from the Persian Gulf to the Island of Qanbalu (Zanzibar), the principal port along the coast in the sea of Zangibar (bahr al-Zanj) (al-Masudi 1962: 94). Also, trade to East Africa from Siraf during the tenth century usually consisted of spices, cotton cloth, perfumes and kitchenware, in exchange for ivory, gold and slaves.³⁰

By the twelfth century, the Island of Kish had become the chief commercial centre in the Persian Gulf and one of the principal trading towns with East Africa regarding slavery. The Cairo Geniza documents in this period also indicate trade competition between Aden and Kish for the markets of East Africa, particularly for slaves, which resulted in several naval clashes between the two states (Goitein 1954: 247-8).

During the fourteenth century the Island of Hurmuz became the principal commercial centre for Indian Ocean trade into the Persian Gulf. The East African trade in gold, ivory and slaves continued to be an important part of the Gulf's commerce in this Island. Historians frequently note the cosmopolitan population of the Island and the great number of Indian, Arab and Persian merchants, as well as African slaves (Aubin 1953: 77-79). In this period, the towns of destination for the African slaves were rarely the port-towns themselves, but rather the distant hinterland towns, such as Kirman, Shiraz or Baghdad. In the nineteenth century, however,

slaves were sent to a variety of locations, including relatively small towns along the Gulf littoral and into the villages of the Iranian hinterland.³¹

By the nineteenth century the trade (slavery) from the Caucasus had largely dried up, mainly because of Russian advances in that area and consequent reconfiguring of the economy. Thus, Iran and the Ottoman Empire became much more heavily dependent on Africa as a source for slaves and black slaves consequently grew in number (Martin 2005: 152). From many historical sources, it is clear that this century witnessed a dramatic rise in slave trading into the Persian Gulf region from East Africa, by way of the pilgrimage trade from the red Sea and by way of Oman (Ricks 1988: 68). Also, reasonable idea of the volume of the mid-nineteenth-century slave trade can be drawn from the British reports (Ricks 1988: 66). In this period, the black slaves came under two types: *habashis*, coming from Abyssinia; and *zangis*, from Africa itself. *Habashis*, who were of a lighter complexion with features closer in type to those of Middle Eastern people, were twice the value of *zangis* (Martin 2005: 152).

By British calculations, in the early part of the century import numbers of slaves to the Persian Gulf as a whole were regularly estimated as between 10 and 20,000, the main centre of trade being Muscat (Kelly 1925: 414-6). With regard to Iran, in 1842 the British estimated the number to be 1,080 in Boushihr and other Iranian ports. None of the Iranian ports sent vessels directly to Zanzibar, except for Langah, from which three or four boats sailed annually, each returning with about 70 slaves. According to a questionnaire of 1842, some 3,000 slaves (two thirds male and one third female) arrived in Bushahr each year, but only about 170-80 remained there, the rest moving on to Ottoman territory (Martin 2005: 214). About one quarter were sold at Bandar Abbas and a small number at Langah and Kangirun (Issawi 1971: 125). In 1847 it was estimated that importation on the Iranian coast amounted to 1,150 'negroes' and 80 Abyssinians per year on average, although this did not include the comparatively small number who were brought back by pilgrims.³² They were of all ages between four and 60 and many women and children were not bought but stolen.³³

The first steps towards the suppression of the slave trade in Iran were taken between Sheil, the British Representative, and Haj Mirza Aqasi, the Grand Vizier, in 1846. However, the coming to power of Amir Kabir (1807-1852) brought a major shift in policy. An agreement was reached between him and the British at the end of 1851 and made effective from 1st January 1852, granting the British the right of seizure and temporary detention of Iranian vessels engaged in the slave trade (Martin 2005: 214).

Winds (spirits) in South Iran³⁴

In reply to the question of what *zar*, *nuban* and *mashayikh* define, the local people in the south of Iran and the Persian Gulf who are even slightly familiar with the riparian culture and way of life will answer: all of these are winds (*bad*). Sa'idi argues:

'Winds are forces which control the entire world, both within and beyond the earth, and everything is subject to their influence. All imaginary and fantastical creatures, such as fairies (*pari*), devils (*div*) and both good and evil spirits, are all winds, hallucinations or airs and all human beings are the targets of both good and bad winds'.³⁵

It is the above-mentioned people leading a riparian life on islands (Qashm, Kish) and in coastal areas (Bandar Abbas, Bandar Lengah, Bandar Boushihr, Bandar Jask) who are the

potential victims of the winds. Among them, it is a common belief that most of these winds emanate from Africa and India, while a few come from Saudi Arabia and other countries of the Persian Gulf. In south Iran, it is said that blacks and poor people are in the first line of attack of the winds.³⁶ Fishermen, seamen (*jashu*) and women who work in palm-groves are second targets. Generally speaking, poor women are in greater danger than poor men, as they are always hungry, sick and in trouble with other members of their society. Rich people who give offerings and arranged ceremonies would never become the winds' target; poor people who do not have any money or goods to offer for such ceremonies are the most vulnerable. People who live in the mountains and deserts or on the sea shore are also good targets for the winds, although rich people living in comfortable houses and safe places are excluded from this risk. Most of the seamen who live on the coast permanently will immediately be attacked by the winds. A wind has no pity and will attack any member of society, from little babies to old people who are awaiting death. However, a wind loves young and strong targets as they possess a great amount of energy and can make a good mount (*markab*). The person who becomes the target of the winds is named *markab*, a mount, or *faras*, a horse, while the wind which is on a mount (patient/victim) is called *habub*, which is an Arabic word and which is also known as *pehpeh* in local riparian language.

Sa'idi reports that all winds, just like human beings, are either Muslim or infidel (*kafar*). Whichever the case may be, after selecting their target all winds will render their *markab* sick and futile (*havayi*). Infidel winds are very dangerous and in some cases even kill their mounts. However, such violation or destruction of their target is rare among Moslem winds. All of the winds are contagious and are capable of transferring from one body to another. For example, if a person is in love with or hates another person, they can pass on their wind to this person, or, conversely, catch their wind. This is also the same in the case of the *baba* and *mama*, who can offer their good winds to those whom they want, or make someone sick by giving them bad winds (Sa'idi 1967: 48).

According to one manner, we can divide all winds into two categories, the first of which comprises winds which can see (*bina*), watch and walk with open eyes. These winds know everything about the entire world. If one can bring them in (*ziravardan*), they can talk and provide answers to all questions. This type of wind has definitely had offering ceremonies and votive meals (*sufra*), drunk blood, heard poetry and songs and had people performing on kettledrums for them. Most of the winds of the *baba* and *mama* fall into this category, which means that their winds are clear-sighted (*bina*). Among 'the people of the air' (*ahl-i hava*), these kinds of winds are named 'clear or pure winds' (*bad-i saf*) which never disturb their mounts (*markab*).

The other category is that of 'blind winds' (*bad-i kur*). 'Blind winds' will bother and perturb their *markab* and are never calm and clear (*saf*). These winds have never had offering ceremonies, drunk blood or heard poems or the sound of kettledrums. During the assemblies and rituals of 'the people of the air', these winds will be brought down and rendered pure, clear and clear-sighted. It is under these conditions that their targets become calm and tranquil.

According to Sa'idi, the most important winds in south Iran are as follows:

- *zar*: all of these are infidel (*kafar*), although there are a few exceptions. Locally they are named *bad-i surkh*, or 'red winds'.³⁷
- *nuban*: these make their targets sad, handicapped and infirm.

- *mashayikh*: all of these are Muslim. These winds are kind and pure (*pak*) and have settled on Muslim coasts.
- *bad-i jinn*: these all belong to the earth or the subterranean world; they are all interconnected, like a chain, and are very dangerous.
- *bad-i pari* (fairy): there are two different kinds of winds in this group, namely infidel fairies and Muslim fairies.
- *bad-i dib* or *div* (demon): they are very large and tall, with a height of more than 40 metres, and live in deserts and on islands. If they touch a human being, he or she will immediately die and become a statue.
- *bad-i qul* (ogre): from afar these look like drunks (*shutur-i mast*) and may kill everybody.

Baba and Mama

For a person who becomes the victim of winds, there are a number of avenues for seeking help at times of difficulties and illness. With the increasing belief in the power of medicine, people may consult a medical doctor first rather than seeking the help of a religious man, but the reverse is also true. In the south of Iran, for a long time during such situations, medical attention was the first port of call for help; when told by doctors that nothing could be done for such patients, the afflicted would generally seek a *mulla* or a religious person (*duanavis*) in an effort to find a solution.

If it was found that these experts could themselves not help the patient, it would be evident that he or she had been made the target and ‘mount’ (*markab*) of a wind. This wind can be a *zar*, a *nuban* or one of the thousands of other winds. In a word, nobody is capable of assisting such patients except *baba*, or ‘fathers’, and *mama*, or ‘midwives’.³⁸ All *babas* and *mamas* were initially victims of one or several winds and *zars*. Little by little, after spending time, and after much exercise and training, they gained a power for controlling their winds and *zars* and for becoming their master. Besides their specialty regarding winds and *zars*, *baba* and *mama* normally also work as local traditional medical doctors.

To escape from the pain and torture of a wind, targets should go directly to the *baba* or *mama* of that specific wind, as each wind has a particular *baba* and *mama*. *Baba* and *mama* inherit their profession and responsibility from their parents; most of them are either black or mixed race and are dark skinned. If they are not successful in healing their patient, they have no choice but to send them to a *gaptaran*, the biggest and most powerful *baba* or *mama* of another region. Each *baba* and *mama* has their own stand (*basat*) with different goods and objects, such as kettledrums with different names, special clay pots for incense (*gashtasuz*), and other musical instruments that they use during their ceremonies. The *baba* and *mama* will drink the blood of animals sacrificed during the rituals; indeed, in their community, they can gain increasing credibility and importance according to the amount of blood they consume.³⁹ A *baba* or *mama* should nominate their successor during their lifetime, for which purpose they hold special ceremonies. If this is not carried out, after their death ‘the people of the air’ will gather together and nominate one of the blacks among themselves to be their *baba* or *mama*.

Bad-i zar

In most regions of Iran where *zar* is found, the cult is basically a woman's religious activity, considered unorthodox and as such often criticized and ridiculed by men and the educated. In Iran, *zar*, which is shunned by the Muslim clergy and educated people in particular, exists within a field of orthodox Islamic spiritual beliefs stipulating that God is the only power. Regardless of the fact that *zar* is a trance religious ceremony that uses drumming and dancing to cure an illness thought to be caused by a demon, it is technically prohibited by Islam as a pagan practice.⁴⁰

In Iran, *zar* concerns the belief in the existence, influence and power of spirits (winds). Women, and less commonly men, are possessed by a variety of *zars*, each of which makes its specific demands. Although men may be victims of spirit possession, like many other countries they refrain from joining in the *zar* ceremonies for fear of ridicule. In such societies, 'although men do not deny the existence of spirits, in the context of Islam' (Callan 2008: 400), they are likely to regard women who appease spirits as un-Islamic; 'proper Muslims appeal directly to Allah' (Masquelier 2001). The effects of possession (*zar*) on the possessed person (*markab*) are that he or she is likely to suffer from an illness with psychological and physical symptoms. Once these demands are satisfied, the possessed person feels better and the *zars* will be satisfied, placated and appeased. The possessed person will be the victim of *zars* for their whole life and there is no complete cure for such patients.

After Sa'idi the most important *zars* in the south of Iran are Maturi, Shaykh Shangar, Dingmaru, Umgarah, Bumaryam, Chinyasih, Pehpeh, Daykitu, Bujambah, Babur, Namrud, Taghruri and Ghisas. Sa'idi reports that in the south of Iran, *zar* is the most dangerous and most prevalent of all the winds. All *zars* are infidel (*kafar*) and originate in different parts of the world. The most dangerous come from the eastern coast of Africa, namely Zanzibar, Somalia and Ethiopia, which had enjoyed commercial relationships with the cities situated on the southern coast of Iran for centuries. The other *zars* come from India and Saudi Arabia, which Sa'idi claims have very strange mountains and wide seas (Sa'edi, 1967: 51). One can recognise the sea or country of origin of each *zar* from the language that they speak. Each *zar* will be brought down and begin to talk after drinking blood; they will talk only to the *baba* or *mama* of the *zar* from the interior of each target, via his or her larynx. The manner and method of the outbreak of each *zar* is different, and they normally reside on the coasts.

It seems that every human being is considered potentially vulnerable to being possessed by a *zar* spirit or spirits. But humans differ considerably in their degree of vulnerability and certain situations are considered particularly inviting to the *zars*. Most of these situations are points of psychological or social stress (Messing 1958: 1121). Therefore, all human beings, regardless of their age, are potential victims of *zars*. A sort of psychic predestination is responsible in other cases. Victims are 'chosen' by the *zar* for their melancholy natures or weak personalities. In some cases the illness plays the role of a religious revelation, which 'calls' the chosen into the *zar cult*. In this connection it is interesting to note that it is not only weaknesses which create points of stress for attracting a *zar* (Messing 1958: 1121).

Children or adults both form good mounts (*markab*) for *zars*. When the *zar* captures its victim and enters into the body of its target, it will make them sick and no medical doctor will be able to resolve this sickness. Like the other winds, each *zar* is the cause of a specific illness. Messing states that symptoms of possession by *zar* spirits include proneness to accidents, sterility, convulsive seizures and extreme apathy (Messing 1958: 1120). As in the south of Iran, where more than 72 different *zars* are in existence, one can recognize around 72 different illnesses in such patients.

A *zar*, like most winds, will penetrate its victim's body in the form of a *jinn*.⁴¹ The first reaction of the *baba* or *mama* of the *zar* should, therefore, be to bring out the *jinn* from the victim's body. The healer (*mama* or *baba*) is himself *zar*-possessed, but has 'come to terms' with the spirit. His first task is to diagnose the specific spirit, or syndrome of spirits, which ails the patient.

Preparation for the Ceremony

As mentioned above, the *zar*'s intention is almost always signaled by sickness. The diagnosis is made by *baba* or *mama* of *zar* assisted by his or her *zar* devotees (*ahl-i hava*). One can become a member of *ahl-i hava*, 'the people of the air', if he or she succeeds in escaping the winds safely subsequent to having become their target. When someone becomes a 'member' of *ahl-i hava*, they should always wear clean white clothes, constantly take baths and use perfume.⁴² 'The people of the air' should never use alcoholic drinks and should never perform any bad or illegal actions, as otherwise their wind will trouble them again.⁴³ There are many prohibitions for *ahl-i hava*, some of which include the following:

- They are not permitted to touch dead bodies, including human and animal corpses and remains.
- They should not touch any kind of uncleanness (*nijasad*) or make themselves impure.⁴⁴
- If someone wants to light their cigarette with the fire of the *shisha* (*qalyan*) of 'the people of the air', they should ask for their permission first; if not, their wind will trouble them.
- They should never become drunk.
- They should never make love with strangers (*namahram*).

Baba or *mama* and the possessed person work towards two goals. Firstly, they must regularise the relationship between the *zar* and its victim by learning who the *zar* is and what it demands in return for removing the sickness. Secondly, they must expel the purely physical aspects of the sickness which the *zar* has inflicted (Young 1975: 571-2).

When the victims are brought to the *baba* or *mama* and they recognize that the wind is a *zar*, they will keep the patient indoors and out of sight for a period of seven days.⁴⁵ They will wash and clean the body of the patient⁴⁶ and he or she should not see a woman, dog or hen during this period. The patient should also not be seen by any women (*mahram/namahram*) and, if the patient is a woman, they will keep her far away from men.

For this reason, a *baba* or *mama* will keep their patients far from the city in a hut constructed from bamboo (*kapar*) situated on the seashore. During all periods of disappearance from public view (*hijab*), the *baba* or *mama* will massage the body of the patient with a special unguent (*ma'jun*) at night. Locally, this unguent is named *girkou* and is made from 21 different ingredients, such as: basil, saffron, *bukhish* (a kind of local plant), cardamom, walnut, chicken's tongue and *gasht* (a kind of Indian wood from Mumbai). All of these ingredients should be soaked in rosewater and the victim's body should be covered with this mixture each night; they are also given some to drink. In the morning following the period of seclusion, the *baba* or *mama* should again wash the patient's body and cover it with *girkou* and another unguent. This new liquid is composed of the dust of seven paths (*khak-i haft rah*), mixed with seven leaves of seven thornless plants.

Before the *zar* ceremony officially begins, the *jinn* which has penetrated the victim's body should be brought out from it. In order to achieve this, the patient should be laid down, their toes tied with the hair of a goat, and some fish oil (*sifah*) rubbed on his/her body and some goat's hair burnt under their nose. At this moment, the *baba* or *mama* will verbally threaten the *jinn* by holding and moving a bamboo stick (*khiyzeran*) in their hand to force it to leave the victim's body. The *baba* or *mama* should then strike the victim's body with this bamboo stick until the *jinn*, with a piercing and sad scream, deserts its mount (*markab*) and escapes.⁴⁷

After the *jinn* has fled, only the *zar* remains settled in the patient's head and body. In order to bring it down, the *baba* or *mama* should organise a ceremony in which they sing songs,⁴⁸ perform music, give votive meals (*sufra*),⁴⁹ and sacrifice an animal and drink its blood. On the day prior to such a ceremony, a woman (*khiyzerani*) who is a member of 'the people of the air', holding a bamboo stick, should go to the houses of the other devotees and call all of them, especially young women (*dukhtaran-i hava*). *Dukhtaran-i hava* 'daughters of air' are young women who are still virgins and have pleasant singing voices. These women are able to dance well and their presence beside the men in such ceremonies (*bazikardan*) is crucial. Besides 'the people of the air', there are other participants who are not patients and come solely to play musical instruments and sing songs, who are traditionally named *safi* or 'people of love' (*ahl-i ashq*).⁵⁰

At the beginning of the *zar* ceremony some charcoal is placed in the incense-pot (*gashtahsuz*) to which some *kundruk* (a kind of local plant) is added. The *baba* or *mama* then fumigates all the musical instruments and puts them in their respective places. They spread a large cloth on the floor on which they arrange many things, such as various foods, fragrant wild herbs, lotus fruit (*kunar*), dates, and the meat and blood of the sacrificed animal. This blood belongs to the *zar*'s sacrifice, which is normally a goat (*kahar*) sacrificed on the day of the ceremony and whose blood is placed in a dish as part of this spread.⁵¹ The *zar* will not begin to speak until it drinks this blood; thus, in order to better understand the *zar*'s requests, the patient should first drink this blood.⁵² Drinking the blood also demonstrates the connection of the target to the 'people of the air'. Additionally, as previously mentioned, the credit and rank of the *baba* or *mama* is directly connected to the number of times blood has been drunk; for example, it is said that a particular *baba* has drunk blood three times, or that a *mama* has drunk blood five times.

During the *zar* ceremonies, in contrast to the rituals for Muslim winds, nobody is permitted to pronounce the name of God, the Prophet or the 14 holy persons (*chahardah ma'sum*); if someone should utter such names by mistake during the ceremony, the *zar* will never be brought down.

Upon arrival in the ceremonial venue, each participant should remove their shoes outside and sit beside 'the people of the air' and the other participants without greeting them. Furthermore, while sitting there they should not speak to anyone. If tea or coffee is brought, they should not place the cups on the floor after it is consumed, but should rather wait until someone comes and collects them by hand. The ceremony opens with the installation of the *baba* or *mama* at the head of the scene, with their special large kettledrum (*mudendu*) placed just in front of them. The *mudendu* is one of the biggest kettledrums of 'the people of the air' and the person designated to play it should sit on a stool behind it. On the floor in front of this kettledrum a silver tray is placed bearing dishes of *gashtahsuz* and *kundruk*, which are dried herbs used as incense.⁵³

Generally speaking, the *zar* ceremony should be performed when everybody is seated on the floor; men and women sit beside each other and sing and dance simultaneously. It is possible for the ceremony (*bazi*) to take as long as two or three days, especially in cases where it is the first ceremony of the victim. It lasts for such a long period as the *baba* or *mama* requires time to bring down the wind from the head and body of the patient. During these periods, none of the participants has the right to leave the venue; if they are tired, they may sleep there.

By a movement of their bamboo stick the *baba* or *mama* will indicate that the ceremony has officially begun and everyone will begin to play (*bazikardan*). The *baba* or *mama* will perform on the *mudendu* and start to sing and all the participants will respond in chorus. At first, most of the songs are sung in Persian, but after a few minutes they change to an unknown (Swahili) language. While there are few local people who understand these kinds of poems or songs – even among the black *babas* or *mamas* – even if they do not know what they are singing, they may continue such a ceremony for many hours.

During the ceremony the patient sits beside the *baba* or *mama*. After the commencement of the ceremony and the singing and dancing, the patient gradually begins to move and tremble; this indicates the movement of the *zar* within their body. When the trembling of the patient increases it transfers from his head to all parts of his body. At this stage his head will lower and he will drink from the blood that is placed in front of him. The kettledrums will then be played more strongly and the singers will sing louder; it is then possible that the *zar* may penetrate the heads of the other participants and all of them move their heads and bodies in unison.

As previously mentioned, the *zar* will be brought down with one of the special songs and it is at this moment that the *baba* or *mama* can talk with the *zar*. They will ask the *zar* its name, from where it comes and why it has captured the body of its victim. They will say that this target is poor, unfortunate, is a fisherman or seaman and that the *zar* should leave him. The *zar*, in its own language, will answer from where it comes, what its name is and for which reason it has chosen its victim; all of this communication takes place in the native language of the *zar*. Most of them can talk in Arabic, Indian or Swahili, without any relation to the native language of their victims, which may be completely different to these languages.⁵⁴

After these introductions, the *baba* or *mama* will ask the *zar* to leave its victim's body as soon as possible. The *zar* will reply that this is not a simple matter and that it needs a votive meal (*sufra*) in order to come down. It also requests bamboo (*khiyzaran*), ankle-rings (*khalkhal*) and clean clothes. The requests of all the *zars* are not similar or at the same level. Some of them, such as *Maturi*, ask for many things and want all of these goods in gold; others request little and are happy with small gifts.

On this issue, al-Shahi reports:

Spirits of the *zar* are thought to be hidden powers, and their influence on human beings manifests itself when these spirits desire certain demands (*talabat*) such as items of clothing, golden and silver ornaments, drinks, cigarettes and other goods. Demands vary, and whatever the spirits ask for will be for the benefit of the possessed individuals and for the satisfaction of the spirits. Spirits are thought to be very sensitive in relation to their demands; they become anxious and afraid that what they have asked for may not be granted. This is reflected in the changed personality of the possessed: he or she becomes anxious that all demands must be satisfied. Once these demands are met, the spirit in question pardons the possessed person and

enters into peace (*salam*) with him or her. Thus the reciprocity and mutual relationships between a person and a spirit: if peace of mind is to be maintained, then demands have to be met in order to pacify and appease the spirits. Another significant factor in the context of reciprocity is the belief in the infinite duration (*abadiyya*) of the possession because the spirit may need the person, at some later date, to execute a wish or a demand. Hence the belief that in the *zar* spirits are not exorcised but propitiated (al-Shahi 1984: 31).⁵⁵

One of the most important things requested by most of the *zar* is a piece of bamboo. Some of them will ask for only one, while others will demand many; normally this type of bamboo is imported from Muscat. On the day of the ceremony (*bazi*), when the *zar* is brought down the *baba* or *mama* will ask him what kind of bamboo he wants. The *zar* will select its bamboo with regard to the bamboo's cords (*bul*, *band*). The bamboo stick should generally have two silver heads or be ornamented with silver rings. In order to prepare the bamboo, on the day before the ceremony they will cover its surface with henna (*hana*) and fish oil so that they may polish it; later they will ornament its surface with silver. Besides bamboo, 'the people of the air' and especially *zars* need clean, white, perfumed cloths, as well as a special large veil (*lang*, *languta*). The *languta* is made from two pieces of a special textile, *shateh* (a type of local handmade textile), each piece of which should not be less than eight meters in length. These two pieces of *shateh* are sewn together with blue, yellow and green silk thread.

If the victim is a very poor person who cannot pay for all of the *zar*'s requests, the *baba* or *mama*, instead of the victim, will instead give some credit as a promise (*rahn*) to the *zar*. For this purpose, they will attach a piece of textile or iron to the arm of the patient; in reality, this is a sign of the promise made to the *zar* so that it will wait and give its mount (*markab*) a chance to provide for all of its requests. Some of the *zars* will accord their victims a short period of time; if, on its expiry, the promise remains unfulfilled, the *zar* will again resume its work.

When all of these requirements have been prepared, in another *zar* ceremony the *baba* or *mama* will bring it down and ask if it is happy with these offerings. If the *zar* accepts these gifts and offerings, the victim will be free to go; however, if the *zar* is unsatisfied, the patient should repeat this stage until the *zar* accepts their offerings.

When the victim is in a state of trance, they will be held from behind and laid down on the ground, although care should be taken that their head does not touch the ground. Another person will hold the patient's feet and move their body so that it faces the direction of Mecca (*qibla*). The *baba* or *mama* will ask the victim to strike their own chest hard with their fist; once the patient does this, the *zar* will suddenly leave its victim's body. At this instant, nobody should speak; if they do so, it would be possible for the *zar* to penetrate their body. Only the *baba* or *mama* can recognize and confirm the departure of the *zar*. When the *zar* leaves its victim, they should move the victim into a sitting position so that their toes touch the floor. After the ceremony, once it has been brought down and satisfied, the *zar* is no longer dangerous. Meanwhile, its victim will never return to their normal situation and, to some extent, the wind will remain in their head.

In some cases, despite all the efforts of the *baba* or *mama*, the *zar* has no desire to leave its victim's body and does not accept any *sufra*, music, offerings, songs or even blood. The ceremony will be repeated for durations of three, seven and finally 12 days; if at the end of these periods, and despite all such attempts, the *zar* remains resistant and decides not to be

brought down, the *baba* or *mama* will cease to work on such a patient. Traditionally, such a victim is called *tahrans* (no special meaning). *Tahrans* are unpopular within their societies, become notorious and hated and are obliged to leave their villages.

Conclusion

Organising and participating in spirit possession cults, ‘sacralizing their own space at the shrine complex, sharing grievances and a sense of community’ (Callan 2008: 401) are all signs of the strive for agency of Muslim women, who are ‘marginalized at or excluded from the mosque’ (Doumato 2000; Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2002; Mernissi 1975) and other male-dominated religious areas in Iran and other Muslim communities. Based on recent documentary film of Mehrdad Oskoui we understand that in the south of Iran *zar* is a spirit possession ritual, a cult, and also a ‘*lieu de culte*’ which expresses the psychological problems of the subordinate position of women in male-dominated communities. During the period of *zar* possession, women step outside the conventional social patterns of behaviour and are free to express their personal crosses, which, in normal situations, are neither tolerated nor respected (al-Shahi 1989: 39). We see also in this film that *zar* ceremonies also allow women to express their problems, enjoy a temporary freedom to behave without the constraints of social conventions and have their own space (Oskoui 2004). Also, confirming Dykstra (1918: 23, *zar* rituals in Iran certainly provide women with a great deal of fun and excitement and give them a distinction and authority which they would otherwise not have.

I feel that within such societies in Iran, if women are more restricted than men in other ways, they are less constrained with regard to religion: they are neither expected to become familiar with matters of liturgy and doctrine, nor to have sufficient moral strength on their own to uphold them. Phrased positively, as Boddy (1988: 10) argues, ‘this means that women are relatively freer to embrace what men consider folk beliefs, those having so-called pagan elements and in whose company they place the *zar*.’

It seems to me the only way that *zar* could be introduced into the Iran plateau was via Black slavery commerce. When we know not all of the Black slaves who arrived in Iran stayed in southern coastal regions, today *zar* can be found and is practiced only among riparian and small scale societies of Persian Gulf. It shows us there are maybe connections between professional job and commerce of people of these societies and the *sea*. Today we need definitely more ethnographical field works in Persian Gulf for opening new windows into this forgotten spirit possession ritual in Iran.

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¹ Abu-Lughod 1993; Aghaie 2004, 2005; Doumato 2000; Flaskerud 2003; Holy 1988; Tapper & Tapper 1987; Tett 1995, Torab 2006.

² See Azadarmak and Tezcur 2008: 211.

³ Flaskerud 2003, p. 35.

⁴ For example, see: Beck 1992: 46; Feilberg 1952: 144-53; Khosronejad 2011.

⁵ Palmistry.

⁶ Generally speaking, most Muslim communities commonly believe in magic (*sehr*) and explicitly forbid its practice. *Sehr* translates from Arabic as sorcery or 'black magic'. Like other Islamic countries, Iranian state does not accept rituals, practices or any activities (sorcery, witchcraft, fortune-telling and occults) under the title of sorcery (*jadugari*) or magic (*sehr*). The word *sehr* is temptation for men for one too many things, especially for them who seeks miracle. In Islam, however, the practice of *sehr* (which means something that is hidden and its cause is unknown) is an act of *kofr* (disbelief). Therefore, magic and sorcery are forbidden and are considered *haram*.

⁷ The other ceremony is *Parikhani* or *Purkhani* which belongs only to Turkmen groups and nomads.

⁸ As far as I know, there are only three studies in this regard: Sa'idi 1967; Modarressi 1968; Riyahi 1977.

⁹ See: Aghakhani 1998, 2005; Aghakhani and Doubille 2002; Asadian 2004; Darvishi 1991, 1998, 2001; Fatimi 2005; Ghaffary 1986; Gharasu 2008; Masudiya 1977, 1985; Moghaddam 2009; Muhibi 1995; Safa 1988; Sharifiyan 2002; Oskoui 2004; Rahmani 2007.

¹⁰ Possession belief may be found in a variety of contexts, altered states 'of consciousness' being only one such context. A belief in 'possession' may also be linked to the modification of a person's behavior, capacities, or state of health, in the absence of an altered state of consciousness. We might speak of such non-trance possession as referring to an 'alteration of capacity' rather than of consciousness. Bourguignon 1973: 15.

¹¹ Cerulli 1934; Constantinides 1991; Frobenius 1913; Natvig 1987; Seligman 1914.

¹² The term 'spirit possession cult' refers to a cult in which ceremonial spirit possession is encouraged in individuals who become members of the cult by virtue at first of uncontrolled possession by a spirit, brought under control by the individual's incorporation in a cult group. For more information on 'Cult' in religious context, see Yinger 1957.

¹³ Abyssinia may refer to the Ethiopian Empire that consisted of modern Ethiopia.

¹⁴ Amharic is a Semitic language spoken in North Central Ethiopia by the Amhara. It is the second most spoken Semitic language in the world, after Arabic, and the official working language of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amharic>

¹⁵ Kahle 1912.

¹⁶ Letter quoted in Thompson and Franke 1913: 281.

¹⁷ Meyerhof 1917: 321.

¹⁸ For more information on *jinn* and exorcism in Bahrain, see: Holes 2000: 27-31. Also on *zar* as a type of *jinn* in Dubai, see: al-Zakari 1998: 123-8.

¹⁹ Kapteijns and Spaulding 1996, p. 175.

²⁰ Until today, the best bibliography of works done on *zar* is made by Dr. R. Natvig and again I am grateful to him for sharing this document with me. In this regard, see: Makris and Natvig 1991: 233-283.

²¹ Lucie Lady Duff-Gordon (1821-1869) was an English writer.

²² A plural form of *ziran* in the Omani dialect is noted by Cerulli (1934: 1217) in his article on *zar*. Also, Dykstra (1918) has mentioned *zeeraan* from Bahrein. In Egypt, the plural form *zarat* has been recorded by De Jong (1976-1977: 32). Derivations of the word *zar* have also been noted, see: Vollers 1981: 344, Trimmingham 1965: 175.

²³ Belo 1960; Broch 1985; Harris 1957; Mead and Bateson 1942; Messing 1958, Nourse 1996.

²⁴ Boddy 1989; Lambek 1980; Ong 1988.

²⁵ '... Pour se livrer à leur fétiche (*zar*) qui consiste à chasser le démon du corps des possédés par des cris, de la musique, et des sacrifices de moutons.' Artin Pacha 1885: 185, n.

²⁶ This manuscript was sent to me by author (N.Aghakhani) and has no date. On *zar* rituals in the view point of psychology, there are also three other articles from the same author to which I did not have access. For further information, see: Aghakhani 1998; 2005; Aghakhani and Doubille 2002.

²⁷ For more information on maritime commerce during pre-Islamic periods of Iran, see: Iqbal 1949-50: 16-17; Muqtadir 1954: 7-8; Hasan 1928: 60-62; Qaemmaqami 1962: 37, 47; Belgrave 1952: 59.

²⁸ Ferrand 1924: 193-257; Hasan 1928: 77-80; Hourani and Carswell 1995: 87-122; Tafazulli 1969: 20-5.

²⁹ On the composition of the Persian Gulf's medieval societies, see: Iqtidari 1963: 119-32; Adamiyat nd: 144-51; Amam 1963: 46; Miskawaihi 2000; Amedroz and Margoliouth 1921: 155.

³⁰ Amam 1963, pp. 47-48,

³¹ In 1851, the British Consul, Keith E. Abbott, reported that in the south-western region of Sistan, 'the cultivators of the soil are, for the most part, slaves both black and white', quoted in Amanat 1983: 172.

³² Hennell to Wellesley, 8.5.1847, FO 248/129, quoted in Martin 2005: 166.

³³ IO R/15/1/168, Jenkins to Jones, No.130, 5.11.1858, quoted in Martin 2005: 166.

³⁴ This part of the article is based on Sa'idi's text.

³⁵ Interview with Baba Salim, one of the *Baba Zar* of Salkh village situated in Qashm Island, quoted in Sa'idi, 1967: 46. For more information on *zar* and winds in other societies, see: al-Shahi 1984: 30; Nourse 1996: 425.

³⁶ For more information on the role of blacks and slaves in *zar* rituals, see: Fredriksen 1977: 57; Macdonald 1911: 332; Meyerhof 1917: 310; Salima 1902: 255-98; Thompson and Franke 1913: 287; Winkler 1934: 15.

³⁷ For more information on *zar* as red wind, see: al-Shahi 1984: 30, 35-36; Muhammad 1969; Kenyon 1995: 111.

³⁸ For more information in this regard, see: Natvig 1987: 680.

³⁹ For more information on the function of blood in *zar* rituals, see: al-Shahi 1984: 29, 34, 36; Boddy 1988: 4, 7-8, 10, 13, 16; Fakhouri 1968: 52-54; Kapteijns and Spaulding 1996: 187; Kenyon 1995: 115, 119; Littmann 1950: 7, 21; Natvig 1988: 59, 62-63, 65; Seligmann 1914: 303, 305, 307, 316-317, 319-320.

⁴⁰ Al-Shahi 1984: 28. For more information on Islam and the *zar* ritual, see: al-Shahi 1984: 28-29, 35-36, 38-40; Fakhouri 1968: 49-50; Kapteijns and Spaulding 1996: 171, 173, 178, 183-185; Seligmann 1914: 300; Natvig 1987: 677; Young 1975: 571.

⁴¹ Relating *jinn* in *zar* rituals, Boddy (1988:10) writes: 'Most *jinn*s are assimilated into three categories, coded by color. White *jinn* are benign; possession by one is not serious and in fact may go unnoticed. Black *jinn* or devils (*shawatin*) bring grave disease and intractable mental illness; possession by one is a dire matter, and curable, if at all, only by violent exorcism. Sickness caused by a black *jinn* might well result in death. Last, there are red *jinn* or *zairan*, whose color points to a characteristic association with blood and human fertility. These are pleasure-seeking, capricious, ambivalent beings that bring milder forms of illness which, though initially distressful, never result in death or severe mental dysfunction.' For more information on *jinn* and *zar* ritual, see: al-Shahi 1984: 30-31, 42; Boddy 1988: 10, 14; Padwick 1924; Seligmann 1914: 305; Young 1975: 583.

⁴² For more information on the role of perfume in *zar* rituals, see: al-Shahi 1984: 29, 32-4; Young 1975: 572.

⁴³ For more information on the role of alcoholic drinks in *zar* ritual, see: al-Shahi 1984: 29, 34, 36-7, 39; Kenyon 1995: 118.

⁴⁴ For more information on purity and impurity in *zar* ritual, see: Boddy 1988: 6-7, 22-3; Seligmann 1914: 320; Young 1975: 571.

⁴⁵ For more information on the duration of *zar* ritual, see: al-Shahi 1984: 33-4, 42; Boddy 1988: 20; Fakhouri 1968: 50-1, 53-4; Kapteijns and Spaulding 1996: 178, 184; Kenyon 1995: 107, 114; Seligmann 1914: 302, 314-5, 321-2; Natvig 1987: 676, 684.

⁴⁶ For more information on washing the body during *zar* ritual, see: Natvig 1988: 59-60, 63, 65.

⁴⁷ For more information regarding the same ritual in Bahrain, see: Holes 2000: 30.

⁴⁸ For more information on singing songs during *zar* ritual, see: al-Shahi 1984: 33, 42; Kapteijns and Spaulding 1996: 172, 175; Fakhouri 1968: 51; Natvig 1987: 679, 683; Natvig 1988: 58-9, 68; Seligmann 1914: 316, 318; Young 1975: 573.

⁴⁹ For more information on votive meals during *zar* ritual, see: Boddy 1988: 6-8, 15, 20; Natvig 1987: 683, 687; Natvig 1988: 59, 65; Seligmann 1914: 309; Young 1975: 572, 579-80.

⁵⁰ See: Oskoui 2004; Rahmani 2007.

⁵¹ For more information on sacrifice during *zar* ritual, see: al-Shahi 1984: 34, 42; Fakhouri 1968: 49, 52-5; Kapteijns and Spaulding 1996: 172; Kenyon 1991: 198; Kenyon 1995: 115; Messing 1958: 1124-5; Natvig 1987: 672, 682-4, 687; Natvig 1988: 59-60, 63, 65; Seligmann 1914: 303-4, 306-7, 310-2, 314, 319; Young 1975: 571-2, 576, 579-80, 583.

⁵² For more information on drinking blood or other liquids during *zar* ritual, see: al-Shahi 1984: 29, 31, 34, 36-7, 39, 42; Dimotheos 1871: 141; Fakhouri 1968: 52; Gamst 1969: 49-50; Kapteijns and Spaulding 1996: 174, 183, 187-9; Kenyon 1995: 115, 118-9; Leiris 1938: 23-124; Leslau 1949: 204-12; Natvig 1987: 681-3, 688; Natvig 1988: 59: 71; Seligmann 1914: 305, 320; Trimmingham 1965: 258-9; Worrel 1909: 30; Young 1975: 521.

⁵³ For more information on the role of music during *zar* ritual, see: al-Shahi 1984: 33; Fakhouri 1968: 51, 53; Kapteijns and Spaulding 1996: 177; Natvig 1987: 673; Natvig 1988: 58-9, 65; Seligmann 1914: 307, 317-20; Young 1975: 572.

⁵⁴ For more information on the language of *zars* during *zar* ritual, see: Kapteijns and Spaulding 1996, pp. 173, 187; Messing 1958, pp. 1122, 1125; al-Shahi 1984, p. 31; Natvig 1987, pp. 677, 678, 679, 689.

⁵⁵ For more information on *zar* requests during *zar* ritual, see: al-Shahi 1984: 28, 30-6, 39-40; Boddy 1988: 10-1, 13, 15, 19-20; Fakhouri 1968: 51-3; Kenyon 1995: 107, 110, 112, 114, 116-8; Leiris 1934: 120; Messing 1958: 1120, 1124-5; Natvig 1987: 681-3; Seligmann 1914: 304, 307, 310; Young 1975: 571-2, 577, 579-582.