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# People of the Wind

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## Abstract

*This article contains ethnolinguistic observations and materials on the so called zâr cult, as practiced in present day Hormozgân province, Iran. The cult, which is spread across the Persian Gulf and central and north-east Africa, consists of practices and rituals of placation with which a category of spirits known as zâr and referred to as winds are warded off from a victim. The article, in particular, aims at offering an accurate description of the sub-lexicon associated with zâr in local Hormozgâni dialects, an aspect of research which has not been taken into consideration up to now.*

**Keywords:** zâr; spirit possession; folk medicine; ethnography; lexicography; southern Iran

## Introduction: wind possession in southern Iran

In many different areas of Hormozgân,<sup>1</sup> there is a strong belief in a category of spirits that can enter a person's body in order to possess him or her and cause illness or misfortune. These spirits, against which people must protect themselves with rituals and ceremonies, are normally referred to as winds.<sup>2</sup> Winds can be Muslim or infidel, dangerous or harmless, pure or impure, good or bad, sighted or blind. They are everywhere and they are always looking for sad and afflicted people, those marginalised in societies, especially women, black people, and the poor being their preferred victims.

The most dangerous of all winds are said to come from Africa and are known as zâr: they are infidel (non-Muslim), impure, bad and, at times, also blind. It is believed that there are some seventy zâr winds inhabiting the southern coasts of Iran, but the most popular number probably only thirteen. Along the coast, Muslim winds and spirits do exist, too, the most famous been known with the appellation of *sheikh* and *nubân*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hormozgân is an Iranian administrative province of the Persian Gulf. It has the Strait of Hormoz at its centre and its capital is Bandar Abbâs. Its population was estimated in the 1390/2011 census to be almost 1,600,000, see *Sâlnâme-ye âmârî-e keshvar*, 1391, (ed.) Markaz-e âmâr-e Irân (Tehran, 1392/2013), p. 141.

<sup>2</sup>The Persian and local word for wind is *bâd*.

<sup>3</sup>Note that, according to S. Qassim Hassan, *Les instruments de musique en Irak e leur role dans la société traditionnelle* (Paris, 1980), p. 138, in Iraq zâr winds are Muslim and positive.

### Research background

Aspects of wind possession in Hormozgân have been recently described in detail by N. Aghakhani.<sup>4</sup> The author, who carried out fieldwork intermittently from 1998 through to 2000 collecting interviews and taking part into possession ceremonies, provides a psycho-analytic (Freudian) interpretation for almost all aspects of this phenomenon, giving at the same time relevance to the clinical anthropological description of it. Half a century before, the pioneering work by the Iranian psychiatrist and anthropologist Q. Sâedi, *Ahl-e havâ*, i.e. “Peoples of the air”, spread light on the subject for the first time.<sup>5</sup> Sâedi had observed the rituals during his long stay in Minâb, Gâvbândi (known as Parsiân from 2008), Bandar Lengeh and the islands of present-day Hormozgân, where he had been confined during the 1950s due to political opposition to the Shah. In what is approximately a field report, he presents brief folk descriptions of *zâr* and other winds, as well as summeries on the possession rituals. He also interestingly provides (in a Persian-based transcription but with no translation) a few specimens of texts from the peculiar and enigmatic language spoken by a possessed individual, observed under certain psychological conditions. It is important to note that not only did Sâedi show special sensitivity towards local cultures, but he also presented folk philosophy and scientific explanations of wind possession as mutually inclusive. Different types of possessions by winds in the Châhbahâr subprovince of Sistân-o Balochestân were described in the book *Zâr va bâd va Baluch* by A. Riâhi.<sup>6</sup> In this interesting work, distinctions are, however, not always clear-cut as regards rituals pertaining to winds such as *zâr* and those regarding winds such as *guât* (the Balochi word for “wind”), whose specificities can otherwise be distinguished. Later, J. During, in addition to partly emending the study by Riâhi, was the first to contribute very important details on the mystic-animistic aspects of the rituals, distinguishing, for example, a “*guat*” ritual with a mystic character, from a *zâr* ritual with a therapeutic character. He also more specifically focuses his attention on the connections among Sufism, shamanism, and possession in Balochestân.<sup>7</sup> Finally, in the last decade, and concurrently with the greater availability of sources in Iran and other countries, *zâr* in its Iranian context has sparked more interest in scholars. Particularly relevant are some contributions by M. Sabâye Moqaddam (all fieldwork based, with new materials from Bandar Abbâs and Qeshm island; trips in 2007 and 2009);<sup>8</sup> P. Khosronejad (relying on, and translating an entire chapter of Sâedi’s *Ahl-e havâ*, re-interpreted on the basis of the author’s own experiences in Bashâgerd and with an up-to-date bibliography; trips between 1994 and

<sup>4</sup>N. Aghakhani, *Les «gens de l’air», «jeux» de guérison dans le sud de l’Iran*, preface by O. Douville (Paris, 2014).

<sup>5</sup>Q. Sâ’edi, *Ahl-e havâ* [“People of the air”] (Tehran, 1345/1966; repr. Tehran, 2535/1976). The book was translated into Russian and edited by A. M. Mixaleva, see Golamxoseyn Saedi, *Oderžimye Vetrani* (Moscow, 1977); it was also almost entirely translated into Italian and edited by F. Ferraro, see Qolâmhoseyn Sâ’edi, *Ahl-e havâ. La gente del vento* (Naples, 1994), and see the editor’s introduction to her Italian translation (*ibid.*, pp. 7–20); see also *id.*, ‘Sviluppi recenti degli studi di antropologia in Iran’, *Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, XLV/1 (1985), pp. 74–85, 80.

<sup>6</sup>A. Riâhi, *Zâr va bâd va Baluch* (Tehran, 1356/1977).

<sup>7</sup>J. During, *Musique et mystique dans les traditions de l’Iran* (Paris and Tehran, 1989).

<sup>8</sup>M. Sabâye Moqaddam, ‘Negâh-i be e’teqâdât va marâsem-e zâr dar miân-e sâkenân-e savâhel-e jonub-e qarbi-e Irân’, *Najvâ-ye Farhang*, IV/11 (1388/2009), pp. 23–30, and, in book-format, but still succinctly, *Zâr dar Irân va keshvarhâ-ye digar* (Tehran, 1389/2010), a work in which the evolution of *zâr* traditions in Iran in the last fifty years is also hinted at. See also *id.* (M. Sabaye Moghaddam) ‘Zâr’, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 20 July 2009, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zar> (accessed 10 July 2018).

1996);<sup>9</sup> M. Aslemarz and S. Zavieh (containing straightforward comparisons between the *zâr* practices and music in Iran and in the Sudan).<sup>10</sup> The article by T. Modarresi, ‘The Zar cult in south Iran’, was the first published article dealing with *zâr* in Iran. Although questionable for containing hasty comments or for being rather superficial, it was written in English and so, in the absence of any other information, it became popular among scholars who were eager to know about Iranian *zâr*.<sup>11</sup>

The following brief description and discussion of *zâr* practices are based on fieldwork and research in Minâb and its villages, in 2002, 2004, and 2008. When Mr Q. Bârâni, an expert in local folktales, narrated a folktale that, although of an obscene nature, had as its object the description of a *zâr* ceremony, I began to study and collect pertinent materials. Moreover, much of the following presentation owes to the discussions following the reading of Sâedi’s *Ahl-e havâ*<sup>12</sup> with Mr. B. Moallemi, an expert in Minâbi dialect and culture. The present description is also more secondarily based on the aforementioned publications, to the extent that they came to my rescue in case of uncertainty.<sup>13</sup>

### The possessed and the community

A person once possessed by a wind is believed to host the wind in his head and his body forever. Relief is achieved during special healing ceremonies, in which the goal is not to draw out the wind, but rather to placate it, in order to prevent future occurrences of illness. This kind of placation is also known as adorcism, as distinguished from exorcism, which implies expulsion of alien spirits.<sup>14</sup> However, *zâr* winds may get into the body together with *jinns*, non-human creatures made of fire, which inhabit the earth but are invisible to human beings in their natural form.<sup>15</sup> The *jinns* belong to Islamic tradition and they, alone, can be exorcised and drawn out.

The possessed, who is said to be “the mount” (*markab*) or the “horse” (*faras*)<sup>16</sup> of the wind and who is also known as *bâdi* or *zâri*, i.e. possessed by the wind or the *zâr*, becomes a

<sup>9</sup>P. Khosronejad, ‘The people of the air: healing and spirit possession in south Iran’, in *Shamanism and Islam: Sufism, Healing Rituals and Spirits in the Muslim World*, (ed.) T. Zarcone and A. Hobart (London and New York, 2013), pp. 131–167. It is not clear to what extent the fieldwork carried out by the author in Bâshâgerd, eastern Hormozgân, did tangibly contribute to his presentation here of *zâr* rituals (see *ibid.*, p. 131).

<sup>10</sup>M. Aslemarz and S. Zavieh, ‘Motâlee-i tatbiqi-e âin-e zâr dar Irân va Sudân’, *Honarhâ-ye zibâ: Honarhâ-ye namâyeshi va musiqî*, XLII/2 (2011), pp. 17–26.

<sup>11</sup>T. Modarresi, ‘The Zar cult in south Iran’, in *Trance and Possession States*, (ed.) R. Prince (Montreal, 1958), pp. 149–155. Note that I. Afshâr Sistâni, *Shenâkht-e ostân-e Hormozgân* (Tehran, 1378/1999), pp. 312–323, described *zâr* practices following Sâedi, *Ahl-e havâ*, too, or also marginally on the basis of first-hand experience. A few hints on the *zâr* practice on Lârak island can be found in Sh. Nadjmabadi, ‘Identité ethnique contre nationalité: le cas de l’île de Lârak (Golfe Persique)’, in *Le fait ethnique en Iran et en Afghanistan*, (ed.) J.-P. Digard (Paris, 1988), pp. 65–74, 72–73.

<sup>12</sup>Especially pp. 40–44, 51–73 on *zâr* proper.

<sup>13</sup>Linguistic data in this article include (usually in brackets) the Minâbi sub-lexicon associated with the *zâr* practices, a good part of which can be found in G. Barbera, ‘Lingua e cultura a Minâb (Iran sudorientale). Profilo grammaticale, testi e vocabolario’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, L’Orientale University, Naples, 2005); some notes on *zâr* in Hormozgân were presented also in *id.*, ‘Hormozgan: situação linguística e aspectos culturais’, *Áyiné. Revista internacional de culturas e sociedades islâmicas*, I (2013), pp. 131–147, 138–147. A small number of lexical items presented hereafter are crossreferenced by means of the abbreviation “q.v.” to the Appendix, where they are discussed in more detail. The Appendix also contains an explication of the presentation of Persian in this article.

<sup>14</sup>See J. Boddy, ‘Spirit possession revisited: beyond instrumentality’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, XXIII (1994), pp. 407–434, 409.

<sup>15</sup>See M. Omidasalar, ‘Genie’, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, (ed.) E. Yarshater (New York, 2000), X/4, 2 pp. 418–422.

<sup>16</sup>Both *markab* and *faras* are Arabo-Persian words.

member of a community of people previously captured by the winds who succeeded in placating them. These are those known as “people of the air” (*ahl-e havâ*). The “people of the air” are sometimes described as being sectarian or antagonistic towards Islam, but affiliation to the *ahl-e havâ* does not usually restrain them from practicing the precepts of orthodox Islam in all other contexts of life. The fact nonetheless remains that religious authorities have very often tried to prevent the cult from being practiced.<sup>17</sup> The *zâr* groups have leaders who are also the healers of sickness. They know exactly how to exorcise the intruding *jinn* and they know how to communicate with the wind and how to placate it, or “to bring it down” (*zir vârdan*, Persian *zir âvordan*). They are all black and they are individually called the *bâbâ* “father” or the *mâmâ* “mother” of the *zâr*.

### Symptoms of sickness

Symptoms of possession usually vary according to the type of wind: for example, the wind *Maturi* causes a heart attack in the victim; *Dingomârow* causes headache and sharp pain in the eyes; *Bumaryom* inflicts pain in the kidney or causes bleeding. Other winds may cause mental disorders or may worsen an already fragile mental health and since mental disorders are conditions often considered as bringing dishonour to oneself and one’s own family, it is probably socially more tolerable to attribute them to spirits than to actual sickness. A person with spirit possession is believed to be clearly afflicted by a wind whenever traditional remedies, consisting, for example, in repeated reading of Quranic verses or the usage of special books filled with magic formulas, fail to cure the illness. In Minâb, one such remedy employs a procedure called *dar ketâb kardiden*. It refers to the practice by a mullah or medium to open a special book (often also the Quran) at random, in order to identify the reasons for the suffering and plight of the afflicted, as well as elements of his destiny, for example, by judging on the basis of the first visible letter of a word in the book that has the same initial of the name of the afflicted. The typical situation as recorded in Tombânû (a village close to Minâb) can be illustrated as follows. One, suspecting another person of being possessed by a wind, asks the mullah: *to, mollâ, dar ketâb bekarâd ke hame zan-e mâ mariz-en*, i.e. “you, mullah, search into the book and tell me if my wife is sick”. The mullah then looks into the book and says: *ketâb agofenen ke zan-e to zâr-iš-en*, i.e. “the book is saying your wife is possessed by a *zâr*”.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup>In Iran, *zâr* or other similar “cults” are considered to belong to magic (*jâdugari*) and sorcery (*sehr*) and are forbidden, see Khosronejad, ‘The people of the air’, pp. 134–135, fn. 7; see also Sabâye Moqaddam, *Zâr dar Irân*, p. 58, for a hint on the opposition of the Iranian government to the *zâr* ceremonies. Note that R. Natvig, ‘Oromos, slaves, and the Zar spirits: a contribution to the history of the Zar cult’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, XX/4 (1987), pp. 669–689, first emphasized the importance of defining *zâr* practices in Africa and elsewhere, including Iran, as forms of cult, tending “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”, *ibid.*, p. 670 onwards.

<sup>18</sup>See Barbera, ‘Lingua e cultura’, p. 130 onwards, fn 137. Note also similarly in Bandar Khamir *sar-e ketâb-kanden* “consulting a writer of prayers and blessings [*doânevis*] in order to treat a sickness by means of books containing magic formulas [*telesm*] and mythological or superstitious stories [*kharâfât*]”, A. Qattâli, *Barrasi-e guyesh va vâzhegân-e Bandar Khamir (Hormozgân)* (Shiraz 1388/2009), p. 219. See reference to similar practices by people called *bâbâ ketâbi* in Hormozgân in Aghakhani, *Les «gens de l’air»*, p. 209 onwards. See also *ibid.*, p. 35: “Après avoir été amené, sans succès, chez le médecin, puis le *doâ Nevis* (celui qui écrit des prières, mollah, religieux, exorciste), le malade sera conduit chez le *bâbâ* (père, guérisseur)”.

### Stages of healing

The process of curing the affliction by *zâr* is quite complex and it usually entails different phases. In one phase known as *hejâb*, or hiding,<sup>19</sup> the sick person is cut off from the sight of any other people and he is urged to live in isolation in a hut (*kotuk*, q.v.), near the sea or in the mountains, or, more recently, in a room at *bâbâ* or *mâmâ*'s house. In the last phase, known as *tashkil-e majles-e bâzi*<sup>20</sup> in both Persian and Minâbi (Minâbi also *gâzi*, see below)—actually the most important stage of the ritual—the sick person joins the group of the “people of the air” and becomes the centre of a special ceremony during which his wind is placated or “comes down” (*zir ateyt*).

Hiding can last up to seven days. During this period, only *bâbâ* or *mâmâ* can visit the sick. Every night, a special mixture of different substances is smeared on his body and is partly given to him as food. This is made up of many ingredients, among which are date's milk or syrup (*shire-ye khormâ*), red mud—rich in iron oxide—from Hormoz (*gelak*, q.v.), ambergris (*ambar*), cloves (*sarkolomfar*, q.v.), cardamom (*hil*, Persian *hel*), saffron (*zâferon*, Persian *za'farân*), nuts (*jowz*), *gesht* (a wood from Mumbai, q.v.), “chicken's tongue” (a plant growing in the mountains, *zabon-e juja*, q.v.), and different kinds of aromatic herbs, which are submerged into rosewater (*golâb*). Such a mixture is called *gorahku* (q.v.).

Since a person possessed by a wind is often also possessed by a *jinn*, first of all the *jinn* must be drawn out.<sup>21</sup> To do so, different techniques are tried. For example, it may be necessary that a black or white hen (*morg*, Persian *morq*) be slaughtered and its blood (*khun*), mixed again with rosewater, be poured on the head of the sick person and smeared on his body. A large and stout cord made of strands of palm fibres (*parvend*, q.v.) should then be coiled up as a ring and run over his body from top to bottom, several times. Then, a fire is kindled and the sick person will warm his hands in it and raise them to his face.<sup>22</sup> The healer can act now in different ways: for example, he may exert pressure on the sick person's breast and order the *jinn* to fly away, and the *jinn* is said to fly away crying intensely.<sup>23</sup> The sick person is subsequently washed with sea water (if hiding happened close to the sea) and taken back to town.

### The game

At this point, the last stage of healing, the ceremony proper, begins. In Minâb, it is also known as *gâzi*, i.e. “game, play” (Persian *bâzi*). It compounds different activities, such as burning enrapturing substances, drumming and dancing. People who have been previous

<sup>19</sup>For a succinct description of the important notions connected to *hejâb* in Islam, see J. Chelhod, ‘Ĥidjâb’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (ed.) B. Lewis et al. (Leiden, 1971) iii, pp. 359–361.

<sup>20</sup>See Aslemarz and Zavieh, ‘Motalee-i tatbiqi-e âin-e zâr’, p. 21; also known as [Persian] *vâred shodan be goruh*, see Sabâye Moqaddam, ‘Negâh-i be e'teqadat va marâsem-e zâr’, p. 25.

<sup>21</sup>See Aghakhani, *Les «gens de l'air»*, p. 43, Khosronejad, ‘The people of the air’, p. 151. This phase is referred to as “mojarati” by Aslemarz and Zavieh, ‘Motalee-i tatbiqi-e âin-e zâr’, p. 20. Compare Persian *mojaradi* “célibat, solitude; dépouillement” [but *mojarad* “isolée”], G. Lazard, *Dictionnaire persan-français* (Leiden, 1991), p. 381, “nakedness; single life, solitariness”, S. Haim, *Farhang-e bozorg-e fârsi-englisi* (Tehran, 1380/2001<sup>16</sup>), p. 907.

<sup>22</sup>According to Aslemarz and Zavieh, ‘Motalee-i tatbiqi-e âin-e zâr’, p. 20, in this very moment the sick whispers for three times the [Arabo-Persian] word *shafâ* “healing!”.

<sup>23</sup>See also Aghakhani, *Les «gens de l'air»*, pp. 43f., for a different description of the events occurring in this phase.

victims of the *zâr*, the *ahl-e havâ*, must attend the ceremony. Others, who have never been afflicted by the winds, may attend the ceremony as watchers but are forbidden to speak. These are known as *ahl-e eshq*, i.e. “people of love”.

The healers, the *bâbâ* or *mâmâ*, lead the group. The sick person is seated in the middle of a room at *bâbâ*'s or *mâmâ*'s house and his head is covered with a white cloth, usually a soft and thin muslin cloth (*malmal*), or a piece of fabric known as *languta*. The participants in the ceremony usually wear white clothes (rarely also green),<sup>24</sup> and sit in a circle around the afflicted. In order to find favour with the *zâr* winds and in order to create sharing among the attendees, a cloth (*sofra*) is spread out on the floor, with eggs (*tokhmorg*, Persian *tokhm-e morq*), aromatic herbs, fresh and dried fruits, including dates (*khormâ*), mangoes (*ambâ*, Persian *anbe*), almonds (*bâdâm*), sweets (*shirini*), and *gorahku* again.

The *zâr* ceremony involves the use of percussion instruments, especially drums (*dohol*) of different sizes, which are placed one next to the other in a row. If the leader is a *bâbâ*, as it often happens, he will play the largest drum, leaving the smaller ones to the other performers. In Minâb, the largest, medium-sized and the smallest drums are known as *mârsâz*, *jorra* and *tumpak*, respectively (ss.vv.). They are also slangily known as “father” (*bâbâ*), “mother” (*mâmâ*) and “child” (*chuk* or *pos*), respectively. Before music is played, various substances are burned around the drums in a clay burner or brazier with charcoal (*geshtasuz*, q.v.). These substances can be agarwood, various types of incense, and a strong smelling gum known as *kondoruk* (q.v.).

When the leader gives the starting signal, the drums begin to play. Songs are sung and drums play trance-like rhythms. The smell of incense and burned gums too, has enrapturing effects and people pass into ecstasies. When a special rhythm attracting the sick person's particular wind is played, he joins the dancing. After dancing for a while, he goes into a possession trance, convulsing violently. Then he calms down and starts conversing with the healer, who, at a certain point, gently hits his shoulders with a bamboo cane (*kheyzaron*, Persian *kheyzarân*), says to the wind “come!” (*biâl*),<sup>25</sup> and asks the wind to reveal its name.<sup>26</sup>

### The game and the manifestation of the winds

The wind, then, reveals its name and speaks through the mouth of the sick person and it is said that it speaks in different languages, including Arabic, Balochi, Urdu or, most often, Swahili or other African languages, that are unknown both to the healer and the possessed. At one point, however, its message is understood and the wind also explains why it possessed the afflicted and also makes specific demands.

It is a rule that the possessed must give the wind what it asks for. All its wishes must be fulfilled. For example, a so-called “light” (*sabok*) wind might ask for simple stuffs, such as a

<sup>24</sup>See Sabâye Moqaddam, *Zâr dar Irân*, p. 19 onwards.

<sup>25</sup>Sabâye Moqaddam, *Zâr dar Irân*, p. 20, and *id.*, ‘Negâh-i be e’teqadat va marâsem-e zâr’, p. 27, has noted “tah(a)la” as the expression in the local language (“zabân-e mahallî”) for “come!”; but this is actually Arabic. Minâbi and Bandarabbâsi have either “biâ” or “bodo”; Aslemar and Zavieh, ‘Motalee-i tabtîqi-e âin-e zâr’, p. 21, also interestingly report “tahla”, saying again it means “biâ”, i.e. “come (2<sup>nd</sup> sg. imperative)”. It is most probable, then, that this Arabic expression belongs to a jargon.

<sup>26</sup>On the complexity of this part of the ritual and on the not always easy way to obtain the name of the wind and its genealogy, see Aghakhani, *Les «gens de l'air»*, pp. 187–189 and 204–206.

piece of garment, a bracelet or a ring or, more usually, a bamboo stick, which the possessed will have to keep with him forever. A “heavy” (*sangin*) wind, on the other hand, will usually ask for something expensive or demanding, such as the blood of a sacrificial animal. If the requests of the wind can be satisfied immediately, the wind is placated during the same ceremony. If its requests cannot be satisfied immediately, a piece of cloth is bound around the sick person’s arm, as a pledge (*rahn*) signifying that the wind’s requests will be satisfied later.

Thus, if the wind has asked for a sacrificial animal and its blood, during a later meeting, a goat (*boz*) is brought into the setting of the ceremony and the sick person will lead it around the cloth of offerings (*sofra*) on the floor for a few times. Then the animal is slaughtered, its blood is diluted with rosewater and is poured into a tray (*sini*), from which both the sick person and the healer drink by means of a glass. (In the subsequent days its meat is cooked and it is given to all the participants in the ritual, who gather again.) From this moment onward, the wind is usually appeased and the sick person, now cured, effectively becomes a member of “the people of the air”.

### Origin of the cult

Spirit possession beliefs are widespread in many countries of the world and they have been commonly noticed among different, unrelated cultures.<sup>27</sup> The similarities found in many spirit possession cults with the appellation of *zâr* (or similar forms like *zar*, *saar*, etc.) and the frequent depiction of spirits as winds throughout central and north-east Africa and the Middle East, including Iran, has led scholars to the conclusion that they must represent a single, historically connected phenomenon. Its source was subsequently considered to lie in Africa, particularly in the Sudan and Ethiopia. In Africa, in fact, the *zâr* presence has been documented since at least the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> In the course of time, the cult passed from Ethiopia or the Sudan into Egypt and Somalia and spread virtually into all the states of the Persian Gulf and most recently into Israel, where it has been observed among Ethiopian Jews.<sup>29</sup> It is also believed that “[i]ts diffusion over this vast area owes much to the slave trade, especially in the nineteenth century, and to the incessant flux and mingling of peoples and cultures associated over the centuries with pilgrimage to Mecca”.<sup>30</sup> The *zâr* cult is, however, not restricted to Muslim societies. It has been also

<sup>27</sup>See E. Bourguignon, ‘Spirit possession belief and social structure’, in *The Realm of the Extra-Human: Ideas and Actions*, (ed.) A. Bharati (The Hague, 1976), pp. 17–26. The literature on possession is vast. Some up-to-date references are provided in C. S. Keener, ‘Spirit possession as a cross-cultural experience’, *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, XX/2 (2010), pp. 215–236, esp. 219–220 on *zâr* proper.

<sup>28</sup>See I. M. Lewis, ‘Zar in context: the past, present, future of an African healing cult’, in *Women’s Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond*, (ed.) I. M. Lewis, A. Al-Safi and S. Hurreiz (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 1–16; see also Natvig, ‘Oromos, slaves, and the Zar spirits’, esp. pp. 678–683 for an account of the earliest (1839) documentation of *zâr* practices in Ethiopia.

<sup>29</sup>See M. D. Edelstein, ‘Lost tribes and coffee ceremonies: Zar spirit possession and the ethno-religious identity of Ethiopian Jews in Israel’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, XV/2 (2002), pp. 153–170.

<sup>30</sup>Lewis, ‘Zar in context’, p. 3. See P. Constantinides, ‘The history of Zar in the Sudan: theories of origin, recorded observation and oral tradition’, in *Women’s Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond*, (ed.) I. M. Lewis, A. Al-Safi and S. Hurreiz (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 83–99. See also Sabâye Moqaddam, *Zâr dar Irân*, esp. pp. 27–39, for brief descriptions of *zâr* in different African countries; Aghakhani, *Les «gens de l’air»*, pp. 79–84 and 131–139 for an outline of rituals in Yemen and in countries in the Persian Gulf and for the description of the “sacrifice” and the ritual system in Egypt, respectively. See also A. Rouaud, ‘Zâr, 1. In the Horn of Africa

found among Christian Amhara, Falasha and, as mentioned, among Ethiopian Jews.<sup>31</sup> A variant of essentially the same cult under the different name of *bori* is practiced in other African countries, especially among the Hausa in Nigeria, from which it has spread in northern Africa (e.g. in Tunisia), and again in the Sudan, where *bori*, brought by Hausa migrants, has melted with *zâr* (*zar*) to form a complex cult, known as *zar-bori*.<sup>32</sup>

The etymology of the word *zâr* has been debated from time to time. Some scholars have associated it with the Arabic verb *zāra* “to visit”, by making reference to the (occasional) practice of holding *zār* ceremonies during “visits” at Sufi shrines in the Maghreb.<sup>33</sup> More attractive and subtle is a renowned explanation by E. Cerulli, supposing that *zār* in Arabic is a loanword from Amharic, the Semitic language of Ethiopia or ancient Abyssinia. Cerulli pointed out that the form *zār* is actually not Semitic and that, in Ahmaric, it should have been a loanword from Cushitic, reflecting the name of the ancient Cushitic supreme Sky God, who was known in various languages as *Jar*, or *Yar*, or *Daro*, and who was reduced to minor rank and finally to an evil spirit during the Christianisation of Abyssinia.<sup>34</sup>

H. Massé was apparently the first scholar to report a *zâr* ceremony in Iran (exactly in the south-east town of Jâsk, very close to the locations referred to in this article), of which he was witness during the 1920's. In his important work,<sup>35</sup> he very briefly describes a healing ceremony referred to as *zâr guèrèften* “saisir le mauvais génie”. In this circumstance, people were seated in a circle around a sick man, who was entirely covered with a veil. A healer beat him softly with a stick, following the rhythm of the chants. Another man burned a plant (probably wild rue) in a hookah and its smoke was inhaled by the sick person, while his head was partially uncovered. It was also inhaled by the other participants in the ritual.

### Origin of the cult in Hormozgân

In Iran, the *zâr* cult must have reached the southern coastal strip together with the African slaves—whose precise African origin is often unclear or unknown—especially during the second half of the nineteenth century, when the slave trade was at its peak.<sup>36</sup> The cult may have also been transmitted from south in the Persian Gulf, or being subsequently influenced by this region. However, since it is safe to say that the *zâr* cult is a rather “recent” phenomenon in Africa, there must be no point in searching for its origins among black communities in Iran before the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

and the Arabian peninsula’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (ed.) P. J. Bearman *et al.* (Leiden, 2002), xi, pp. 455–456; T. Batain, ‘Zâr, 2. In Egypt’, *ibid.*, pp. 456–457.

<sup>31</sup>See Natvig, ‘Oromos, slaves, and the Zar spirits’, p. 669.

<sup>32</sup>See Constantinides, ‘The history of Zar in the Sudan’, pp. 83–99.

<sup>33</sup>See Lewis, ‘Zar in context’, pp. 13f.

<sup>34</sup>E. Cerulli, ‘Zâr’, in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, (ed.) M. Th. Houtsma *et al.* (Leiden and London, 1936), iv, pp. 1215–1224. Connections have also been made with regard to the homophonic Persian word *zâr*, with meanings including “deplorable”, “sad”, “weak”, “wounded”, “weeping”, “mourning”, Haim, *Farhang-e bozorg*, p. 483. See also Natvig, ‘Oromos, slaves, and the Zar spirits’, p. 678 n. 39, Sabâye Moqaddam, *Zâr dar Irân*, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup>H. Massé, *Croyances et coutumes persanes, suivies de contes et chansons populaires* (Paris, 1938), 2 vols. See *ibid.*, ii, p. 44.

<sup>36</sup>See B. A. Mirzai, ‘African presence in Iran: identity and its reconstruction in the 19th and 20th centuries’, *Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire*, LXXXIX/2 (2002), pp. 229–246, esp. 242–245, for the association of Afro-Iranians, enslavement and the practice of *zâr* cult.

<sup>37</sup>As different scholars have often been tempted to do; see Sabâye Moqaddam, *Zâr dar Irân*, pp. 67–79, with a disproportionate digression on black slaves in Iran from the pre-Islamic epoch; similarly Khosronejad, ‘The people of the air’, pp. 144–146; see also Modarressi, ‘The Zar cult in south Iran’, p. 150. The opinion by Aghakani, *Les*



African musical traditions in Hormozgân have been retained in forms that are sometimes clearly traceable to a specific region of Africa: for example, during the ceremonial rituals for the cult of *Nubân*, a Muslim and sacred wind, a particular stringed instrument, locally known as *tambira*, is played. This is a kind of lyre consisting of six strings attached to a wooden bowl covered by goatskin. This instrument is very common in the Sudan, where it is also known by the almost identical name of *tambura* and is associated to a possession ritual known as *zar-tambura*.<sup>38</sup> Songs, music and dance have a typical, “Hormozgâni flavour” and are often popularly considered to be strongly influenced by Africa.<sup>39</sup> However, no in-depth studies seem to have been published so far that may closely define the influence of Africa and African music on the traditions of Hormozgân.

### Speaking in tongues

Different authors writing on the *zâr* cult in Iran—as well as elsewhere—have almost always reported that, during ceremonies, winds speak through their possessed and that they do so either by uttering words with no clear meaning or by speaking in languages unknown to anybody. One such language is said to be Swahili. There must be some truth in this, in that Swahili has been the lingua franca of east Africa for centuries and could have been one of the languages spoken by older generations of Africans in Iran. Moreover, many winds have been said to have Swahili names.<sup>40</sup> The dialect of Bandar Abbâs (Bandarabbâsi also commonly Bandari), has at times given the observers the impression of containing African elements. Note, in particular, the following remarks in a noted report of the 1900’s: “The bulk of the inhabitants [of Bandar Abbâs—G. B.] belong to a hybrid race of mixed Persian, Balûchi, Arab and negro descent and are known as ‘Abbâsis; the lower orders of them speak a patois—also called ‘Abbâsi—which is a compound of Persian, Balûchi, Arabic and Swahili ingredients”.<sup>41</sup>

*«gens de l’air»*, p. 28, according to whom “[l]es cultes du *zâr* seraient arrivé en Iran avec les esclaves amenés par les Portugais”, is not correct, as is a statement that the Portuguese arrived in the region in the fourteenth or fifteenth century and were replaced by the English in the sixteenth century. The Portuguese, in fact, showed up in the sixteenth century, with the siege on Hormoz by Alfonso de Albuquerque, and were expelled in 1622 by the Persian king, Shah Abbâs I with the help of the English East India Company (established 1600).

<sup>38</sup>See, in particular, Aslemar and Zavieh, ‘Motalee-i tatbiqi-e âin-e *zâr*’, p. 19, with pictures. The pictures show how these instruments are identical both in Hormozgân and in the Sudan, while being very different from other lute-type instruments known by similar names in Asia.

<sup>39</sup>Consider the following impressions by I. Afshâr Sistâni: “During the night, in order to diminish their grief and sorrows [perhaps often generated by “bad winds” or probably for general suffering and displacement—G. B.], blacks gather all together, playing and singing in the tradition of their native land. In virtue of the combination of the Africans’ music with that of the indigenous people, gradually, the traditional music of Hormozgân and the whole coastal area of the south were born”, Afshâr Sistâni, *Ostân-e Hormozgân*, p. 66.

<sup>40</sup>See E. Alpers, ‘The African diaspora in the Indian Ocean: a comparative perspective’, in *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, (ed.) S. de Silva Jayasuriya and R. Pankhurst (Asmara, 2003) pp. 19–52, who identifies African roots in individual *zâr* spirits as also mentioned above, “such as *Pepe* (from Swahili *pepo*, the generic term for any possessing spirit), *Maturi* (from Swahili Matari, a specific spirit), *Dingmaro* (still another Swahili spirit, Dungomaro),” *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>41</sup>J. G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, ‘Omân and Central Arabia* (Calcutta, 1908–1915), 2 vols., ii, p. 10. Note also the following general opinion by M. R. Izady, ‘The Gulf’s ethnic diversity: an evolutionary history’, in *Security in the Persian Gulf: Origins, Obstacles, and the Search for Consensus*, (ed.) L. G. Potter, G. G. Sick (New York, 2002), pp. 33–90, according to whom “[r]epresentatives of many important African families of languages, such as Bantu, Somali and Ethiopic, are found in compact communities on both sides of the Strait of Hormuz, in Iran, Oman, and the UAE”, *ibid.*, p. 72. Actually, no African language has ever been found and documented in present-day Hormozgân.

Assuming that *zâr* special languages are unknown because they come from Africa and that nobody is able to understand African languages anymore, as has been often assumed by many different scholars, is too simplistic or wrong, since in Africa itself, the supposed original milieu of *zâr*, the possessed are at the same time usually said to speak in languages unknown or unfamiliar both to themselves and to their healers. In fact, glossolalia is a common phenomenon in possession cults and trance states, which may consist of slangs and argots that can be entirely analyzed on the basis of the local dialects of the possessed and their community.<sup>42</sup>

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### Appendix: Remarks on Selected Vocabulary

The following comparative remarks are restricted to Hormozgân's territory, since, importantly, many specific lexical items pertaining to the *zâr* cult and practices have been almost exclusively recorded in the dialects of this province. These dialects, that are Southwest Iranian from a historical point of view, include those spoken in the towns of (from west to east): Bandar Khamir, Bandar Abbâs, Fin, Rudân and Minâb. The entry word and its translational equivalent or definition represent Minâbi. As for the general presentation of a lexical item, note as follows: Persian definitions have been translated into English, but Persian words may reappear in square brackets to avoid possible ambiguities or in cases of peculiar definitions. Forms and meanings of Persian items, if not otherwise stated, follow those presented in G. Lazard, *Dictionnaire persan-français* (Leiden, 1991), but, as far as transcription is concerned, *c* > *ch*, *x* > *kh*, *š* > *sh*, *ž* > *zh*. Transcriptions of Iranian dialects follow their sources or the transcription of Persian in the cases just mentioned. Sources are quoted following the reference system adopted throughout this article.

*gelak*: red mud—rich in iron oxide—from Hormoz, Persian *gel-e sorkh*. Compare Bandarabbâsi *gelak* “id.”, M. Jalâli, *Bandar Abbâs dar gostare-ye târih va zabân* (Tehran 1387/2008), p. 167; also identically A. Sâyebâni, *Vâzhenâme-ye bumi-e Hormozgân* (Tehran, 1392/2013), p. 168; Fini *gelak* “id.”, B. Najibi Fini, *Barrasi-e guyesh-e Fini* (Tehran, 1381/2002), p. 123; Bandarkhamiri *gelak* “id.” [*arus-e dariâi, khâk-e sorkh ke ma'dan-e asli-e ân jazire-ye Hormoz ast*], Qattâli, *Guyesh-e Bandar Khamir*, p. 294. The *gelak* is also an ingredient in the preparation of *surâgh*, typical Hormozgâni dish with sardine sauce and bitter orange peels, and it is used in drops with *timushi*, thin and crushed bread seasoned with oil.

*gesht*: a wood from Mumbai. This definition dates back to Sâedi, *Ahl-e havâ*, p. 52, and has been reused in all subsequent studies (spelled as either *gesht* or *geshte* or *gasht*, etc.). The form *geshta* as recorded by local lexicographers appears to have a little different meaning and is apparently never associated to *zâr* ceremonies. It is commonly locally described as a “matter” (Persian *mâdde*) as fragrant as agarwood (Persian *ud*), made out of musk, ambergris, rosewater,

<sup>42</sup>See the pioneering research on the explanation of the deformed native lexicon in the apparently confused language of the possessed carried out among communities of Amharic-speaking Falashas in Ethiopia by W. Leslau, ‘An Ethiopian argot of people possessed by a spirit’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, XIX/3 (1949), pp. 204–212.

sap, sugar, and other substances. In Bandar Abbâs, it is burned on a brazier as it emanates a sweet smell, and it is used in mourning ceremonies and in ceremonies regarding the reading of the Quran and the interpretation of dreams, see Jalâli, *Bandar Abbâs*, p. 166. The *geshta* is also used in wedding ceremonies still in Bandar Abbâs, see Sâyebâni, *Vâzhenâme-ye bumi*, p. 166; or to scent homes and clothes in Bandar Khamir, see Qattâli, *Guyesh-e Bandar Khamir*, p. 291; or to shoo away insects in Rudân, see A. Mot'amedî, *Rudân, behesht-e jonub* (Bandar Abbâs, 1380/2001), p. 342. Note also *geshte* "incense [*bokhur*]" in Sâedi, *Ahl-e havâ*, p. 113. See also next entry.

*geshtasuz*: clay burner or brazier with charcoal (*geshtasuz*). Literally "geshta burner", see also the previous entry. It is usually translated in Persian as *mejmar* "censer, perfume vaporizer" in the relevant dialectal sources. Note also *geshtesuz* "incenser [*bokhurdân*]... produced especially in Bandar Khamir", in Sâedi, *Ahl-e havâ*, p. 113.

*gorahku*: special mixture of different substances which is smeared on the sick person's body and is partly given to him as food. In Bandar Abbâs, *gorahku* is a sort of resin (Persian *samq*), burned on a brazier during the *zâr* ceremonies (particularly during the "game", see also above, in this article) and producing a strong and intense smell; it is said that the smell of this resin leads the sick person into a "state of intoxication and loss of consciousness [*hâlat-e sokr va eqmâ*]", according to Sâyebâni, *Vâzhenâme-ye bumi*, p. 164 (Bandarabbâsi *gorahku*); also similarly Jalâli, *Bandar Abbâs*, p. 166; Minâbi also interestingly *gorahgu* [*si!*] "mixture of ambergris and wild rue [the wild rue is used in Iran as antidote for the evil eye—G. B.] with psychotropic effects, which is burned during *zâr* ceremonies", H. Mohebbi Bahmani, *Barrasi va tousif-e zabânshenâsi-e guyesh-e Minâbi* (Tehran, 1384/2005), p. 234. Note that Sâedi, *Ahl-e havâ*, p. 52, wrongly transcribes the same word as *greku* (an initial cluster CC- is never allowed in the phonological system of any of these dialects and it is odd for the syllabic structure of Persian, too), but *garaku*, p. 113; also wrongly transcribed in Khosronejad, 'The people of the air', p. 152 (*girkou*); see Aslemarz and Zavieh, 'Motalee-i tatbiqi-e âin-e zâr', p. 20 (*gareku*), Aghakhani, *Les «gens de l'air»*, p. 217 (*gorahkou*). Among other ingredients of *gorahku* mentioned by Sâedi, *Ahl-e havâ*, p. 52, are basil (*reyhân*) and "buxesh" ([a plant] from India), probably literally *bu-ye khosh* "sweet smell". The *gorahku* can also be inhaled by means of a hookah.

*jorra*: medium-sized drum. It is also found in this form in Rudân, see Mo'tamedî, *Rudân*, p. 252; Sâedi, *Ahl-e havâ*, p. 109, quotes *jorra* "small and light drum [*dohol*] measuring 30–25 cm in length"; see also *jore* (possibly *jorre*) in Aslemarz and Zavieh, 'Motalee-i tatbiqi-e âin-e zâr', p. 19; note Persian *jorre* "ancient musical instrument resembling a lute [*târ*] with a small chamber", H. Anvari, *Farhang-e bozorg-e Sokhan* (Tehran, 1381/2002), 8 vols., iii, p. 2124; Persian *jurra* "name of a musical instrument", F. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English dictionary* (London, 1963<sup>5</sup>), p. 361.

*kondoruk*: a strong smelling gum. This is turpentine, Persian *saqqez*, which is commonly locally chewed as gum; in *zâr* ceremonies, it is also dissolved in boiling water and inhaled by the possessed, see Barbera, 'Lingua e cultura', p. 188. Compare Rudâni *kondoruk* "chewing-gum", Mo'tamedî, *Rudân*, p. 336; Bandarabbâsi *kondoruk* "local chewing-gum; gum of wild hill bushes [*âdâms-e kuhî az samq-e butehâ-ye vahsh*]; turpentine [*saqqez*]", Jalâli, *Bandar Abbâs*, p. 161; Bandarkhamiri *konderek* "chewing-gum, turpentine" (note also *konderek xâsten* "to chew a gum", *konderek-e-darmûnî* "sweet smelling gum with medical

properties”) Qattâli, *Guyesh-e Bandar Khamir*, p. 276. Note that it is this last one the type of gum most likely used in *zâr* ceremonies. See also Balochi *kundrik* “a strong smelling folk medicine, made from brine”, J. Elfenbein, *An Anthology of Classical and Modern Balochi Literature* (Wiesbaden, 1990), 2 vols., ii (Glossary), p. 81; P. O. Skjærvø, ‘Baškardi’, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, (ed.) E. Yarshater (London and New York, 1988), iii/8, pp. 846–850, 850, on Bandarabbâsi *kondorūk* “turpentine”, Persian *saqqez*; note Persian *kondor* “encens”, Lazard, *Dictionnaire*, p. 342.

*kotuk*: small hut with tent structure, usually covered with palm leaves. On the diffusion of this word, see G. Barbera, ‘Minâbi notes’, in *The Persian Language in History*, (ed.) M. Maggi and P. Orsatti (Wiesbaden, 2011), pp. 309–329, 317.

*mârsâz*: large double-skin drum. This seems to be the same drum known in other parts of Hormozgân as *gap dohol*, Persian *dohol-e bozorg*. It has apparently the same function as the *mudendow* “large single-skin drum” (so Sâedi, *Ahl-e havâ*, p. 114) does have in this occasion in other areas of Hormozgân; see also Khosronejad, ‘The people of the air’, p. 153.

*parvend*: large and stout cord made of strands of palm fibres. The etymology and diffusion of this word have been discussed in detail in Barbera, ‘Minâbi notes’, pp. 321f.

*sarkalomfar*: cloves, Persian *mikhak*. Note Persian *qaranfol* “giroflee; œillet”, Lazard, *Dictionnaire*, p. 318.

*tumpak*: goblet drum. It indicates the same instrument as Persian *dombak* or *tompak*, as described in Lazard, *Dictionnaire*, p. 189 (“tambour en forme de calice”).

*zabon-e juja*: “chicken’s tongue” (a plant growing in the mountains). The definition (Persian *zabân-e juje*) of this plant dates back to Sâedi, *Ahl-e havâ*, p. 52, and has been recorded in the subsequent literature, but not in Sabâye Moqaddam, *Zâr dar Irân*, and *id.*, ‘Negâh-i be e’teqadat va marâsem-e zâr’. In local lexicography, however, the word has apparently never been recorded.

*zâr*: as in almost every country in which the *zâr* cult is practiced, the word “zâr” is used in Iran similarly to denote a type of wind spirit, the sickness that such a spirit can cause by possessing humans, and the rituals necessary for their pacification. Interestingly, local lexicographers focus more often on the concept of sickness, with very little variation: Bandarabbâsi *zâr* “a kind of sickness of the spirit [*bimâri-e ruhi*] which affects those black people that are called ‘people of the air’ [*ahl-e havâ*]; *zâr* or winds have different names”, Sâyebâni, *Vâzhenâme-ye bumi*, p. 112, “a kind of the well-known disease characterized by epileptic seizures [*qash*]”, Jalâli, *Bandar Abbâs*, p. 145; Bandarkhamiri *zâr* “a kind of mental disease [*bimâri-e ravâni*] with a *jinn* penetrating the sick person’s body”, Qattâli, *Guyesh-e Bandar Khamir*, p. 207. Although the *zâr* “mosaic” seems to be absent in contemporary Bushehr, as also reported, among others, by S. J. Hamidi, *Farhangnâme-ye Bushehr* (Tehran 1380/2001), p. 350, the word *zâr* is nevertheless considered to be of common use and described as meaning “a ceremony [*marâsem*] for people whose bodies have been penetrated by *jinn*s; also, the *jinn*s that penetrated the body; and a sickness similar to epilepsy [*sar*]” by F. Mirshekâr, *Farhang-e vâzhegân-e mahalli-e Bushehr* (Bushehr, 1389/2010), 5 vols., iii, p. 211, with an ad hoc dialectal utterance: ‘*i zâr tu lâr-eš-en beberin-eš jamb-e dey zâr*, i.e. ‘this zâr is inside his body, take him to the mother of the zâr’.