

- Synopsis of the Monograph

My PhD dissertation is titled “Drumming with Winds: Dwelling, Healing, and Creation among the Islanders of Southern Iran.” I worked with the inhabitants of Hormozgan Province in the south of Iran to study different sound healing practices that are known under the umbrella term of zar.

Zar performances are striking, time-honored, vivid, and ever-changing healing practices that are most prevalent in the Middle East and the North of Africa. Practitioners of zar believe in evil and good spirits, which they often identify with the blowing winds, and which possess people, sometimes bringing them various kinds of harm and suffering. When someone is possessed by one of these winds, specific sound rituals need to be performed by traditional healers, their musical bands, and the formerly possessed, who together constitute distinct local zar communities. Engaging people’s different experiences of sound (also touch, smell, sight, and taste), zar performances use sensory practices to tame the winds, and potentially help the sufferers cope with their difficulties, pains, or afflictions. Zar practitioners in Iran, usually live in ahle havā (people of the wind) communities, which have historically been diverse groups inhabiting southern Iran by the Indian Ocean. Nowadays, the communities are mainly scattered across the central south, Bushehr and Hormozgan provinces, yet the latter hosts most of them in two port cities and one island: Bandare Abbas, Bandare Lenge, and Jazireye Qeshm.

Like many other non-biomedical forms of healing knowledge, zar is sometimes considered as an untruthful belief of credulous and backward people, with roots in the healer’s charlatanism. In contemporary Iran, zar performances are banned by the Islamic government on the one side and disdained by the proponents of modernization policies on the other. Such ontological narrowmindedness has put different ahle havā communities between the scissor blades of deprivation and exclusion. They do not have any chance to perform their healing practices in public (typically in the open air on beaches), therefore, zar has been exiled to enclosed havens since a few decades ago. The healers, their assistants, and their drummers are at risk of governmental violence, arrest, and torture on

the one hand, and community-level devaluation, harassment, and violence, on the other hand.

Far from seeing zar as ancient, stable, and superstitious ritual practices, the principal objective of my thesis was appreciating the efficacy of zar as a form of sound healing that is vivid and living. I aimed to explain how zar healers, with the help of their musical bands and sufferers, produce real change on and through the physical body, and heal.

My dissertation consists of fifteen different sections blowing in three main directions: [a] ‘the prologue’ and ‘the epilogue’ serve as two different harbours at the beginning and the end, where my journey starts and then perches. [B] The four anchors, ‘medicine in Iran’, ‘Iran’, ‘Qeshm Island’, and ‘ritual theory’, try to contextualize the work, to help the reader become more familiar with ahle havā’s historical and contemporary lifepaths, and to have a short review of different theories on ritual in socio-anthropology. [C] Based on my fieldwork in Iran, the nine central chapters of the dissertation try to respond to the most important questions about zar, its performance, and its efficacy. These chapters follow a phenomenological socio-anthropological approach and aim to provide a detailed description of what zar is, and a profound explanation of how it heals.

It is a common belief among social scientists that zar is a gendered ceremony that is practiced by women only. Moreover, the idea of zar being transferred to the south of Iran through the slave trade has become popular since a few years ago. The fifth chapter of my thesis, for instance, elucidates the colorfulness of zar practitioners. I have avoided seeing ahle havā as separatist communities that push for the advocacy of racial, ethnic, religious, or gender separation from the inhabitants of the south of Iran. Rather, I show how zar mediates the encounter between men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, Afro-Iranians and the rest of Iranians, etc. to construct, rebuild, and strengthen their relationships.

In the seventh chapter of the dissertation, I examine the local, national, and global socio-politico-economy of zar, and describe how zar practices have the capability of blowing in different paths, mixing with other sacred and non-sacred healing practices, and becoming

exquisite hosts for contemporary artistic, religious, and even academic experiences all around the world.

The last chapter discusses the worldviews of zar practitioners by listening to their stories of sickness and suffering. I have explained that the experience of falling ill might reveal an unhomelike being in the world to the sufferer. To survive, one must become able to understand, accept, and manage this uncanniness. Such acceptance of pain and suffering will move us to flourish, and to create new paths of life towards novel thoughts, feelings, and actions. In this sense, zar healing is improvising paths of knowledge about human body, creating new ways of acknowledging our afflicted being in the world, so as to make the burden of suffering bearable.

- Biography and Research Interests

Nima Jangouk (Ph. D., University of Ottawa, 2023), is a socio-anthropologist trained in both disciplines (sociology and anthropology). He has taught various courses such as ‘Anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa’, ‘Popular Culture in the Middle East’, ‘Ethnography, Globalization, and Culture’, ‘Anthropology of Religion,’ ‘Visual Anthropology’, and ‘Qualitative Research Methods in Sociology and Anthropology’ at the University of Ottawa, Carleton University, and Concordia University.

Nima is interested in exploring how non-verbal doings (playing music, speaking in tongues, dancing, playing, and even silent communication) perpetually unfold our togetherness, especially in medical, religious, and musical paths. Phenomenology, embodied research, music and trance, sound healing, altered states of consciousness, socio-anthropology of everyday life in modern Iran, and contemporary Middle Eastern societies are some of his other areas of research interest.