



## ZĀR

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**ZĀR**, harmful wind (*bād*) associated with spirit possession beliefs in southern coastal regions of Iran.

In southern coastal regions of Iran such as [Qeshm Island](#), people believe in the existence of winds that can be either vicious or peaceful, believer (Muslim) or non-believer (infidel). The latter are considered more dangerous than the former and *zār* belongs to this group of winds. Many varieties of *zār* are known, including Maturi, Šayk Šangar, Dingemāru, Omagāre, Bumaryom, Pepe, Bābur, Bibi, and Namrud (Sā'edi, pp. 57; Interviews, 2007, 2009). Most types of *zār* are very dangerous and cause disease, discomfort, and at times serious illnesses for the victim. Everyone is subject to the action of the *zār*, but the poor and the deprived seem to be the most common victims. *Zārs* are also considered contagious; for example, when people love or hate one another, they can give their *zār* to those whom they love or hate. The belief is that one can never get rid of *zārs*, but can only come to terms with them to leave the victim alone. These beliefs are common to many areas in south and southwest Iran, including [Baluchistan](#) where harmful winds are usually called Gawat ('wind' or 'air'; Riāḥi; Darviši).

Special ceremonies are held to pacify the *zār* and alleviate the patient's symptoms. These ceremonies, called by a leader, bring together the patient and those previously afflicted by the *zār* and involve incense, music, and movement. The details of the ceremony differ according to location and have undergone changes with the passage of time (Sā'edi, pp. 42-52; Taqvā'i, 1999; Bāzmāndegān Qešmi). While Ġolām-Ḥosayn Sā'edi (q.v) reported the practice



of this ceremony along the coast of the [Persian Gulf](#), from [Bušehr](#) to [Bandar-e Lenga](#) in 1961, at the time of this research, *zār* was no longer practiced in certain locations such as Bušehr and observed far more actively in Qeshm Island than in [Bandar ‘Abbās](#). Furthermore, certain details, such as riding the sacrifice before slaughtering it or drinking the blood of the sacrifice by participants in the *zār* ceremony, have not been mentioned in older sources such as Taqvā’i or Modarresi, but they have come up in interviews with locals and local researchers (Interviews, 2007, 2009). Sā‘edi also emphasizes the presence of young females with good voices and dancing abilities in the ceremonies, but their presence was neither mentioned in interviews nor shown in films that were produced more recently (Bāzmāndegān Qešmi).

Based on records and interviews regarding the *zār* ceremony in Qeshm Island, roughly two phases in the ritual can be recognized: separation and incorporation. Preparations for the *zār* constitute the separation phase. This phase begins with a person complaining from feelings of disease and discomfort to cult leaders (the male *Bābā zār* or the female *Māmā zār*). As some cult leaders have already been possessed by *zārs* and have managed to control them, they can help others in controlling their *zārs*. Some leaders may recommend that the patient first seek the help of a doctor while others may oppose seeking this type of help if they believe that the needles from injections prescribed by the doctor will further agitate the *zār* and create more problems for the patient. Having opted for a remedy from *Bābā* or *Māmā zār*, the patient will prepare to stay in isolation for up to seven days. During this period, only *Bābā zār* or *Māmā zār* can visit the patient and use specific treatments such as rubbing a combination of aromatic herbs, such as Guraku and Gešt, and spices on the patient’s body. After the separation phase ends, the patient’s body is cleaned and washed, and preparations are made for the incorporation phase. Members of the cult inform everyone about the upcoming ceremony and, as it is considered a sin not to attend a ceremony, every member of the cult attends. There can also be a group of spectators, who may or may not be possessed, who participate in the ceremony. Everyone gathers in a circle with the patient in the center while a piece of cloth, with eggs, dates, confetti, and aromatic herbs, is spread on the floor. After the patient’s head is covered with a piece of white cloth to keep him/her from the glances of strangers, a tray holding aromatic herbs on charcoal is passed around and the patient and the participants are frequently incensed with the smoke from the mixture. The *zār* leader takes the lead on music (drums) and is followed by musicians and others present. The leader usually knows the name of the *zārs* and the music

(specific beat of drums) that goes with them. *Bābā* or *Māmā zār*s also sing and the participants respond in turn. During the singing of the incantations, which can be in different languages or dialects (Sabaye Moghaddam, p. 26) or pure melodic sounds containing no discernible words, a *zār* makes itself known by means of a sign that is recognized by the possessed person, who then feels a strong inner urge to move. Every piece of music goes with a specific spirit; with each type of music, some members of the cult may start moving and shaking. If there is no reaction from the patient, musicians change the tune until they see a reaction that helps the healer identify the spirit who has taken over the afflicted. The reaction is usually expressed as a swinging of the upper body, vertical movements of the head, and the shaking of the shoulders. When the *zār* is identified, the healer starts a conversation where she/he tries to find out what the spirit wants in exchange for leaving the patient alone. *Māmā zār* or *Bābā zār* speak with the spirit through the patient and ask the *zār* about the reasons behind the affliction as well as its demands for leaving the patient alone.

The language through which *Bābā/Māmā zār* communicate with the *zār* may be a language that is ordinarily unfamiliar to both *Bābā/Māmā zār* and the patient. It is sometimes a combination of Persian, Arabic, Sawhili, and Indian. The *zār* names its demands, which may be as simple as a few prayers or a piece of bamboo (*keyzarān*) or something more substantial such as a sacrifice. *Bābā/Māmā zār* then makes a “binding” by tying a piece of cloth around the patient’s arm. This is an assurance that the demands of the *zār* will be met. The belief among the cult is that if the *zār*’s wishes are not granted, the *zār* will return and create more problems for the patient. If the demands of the *zār* can be easily obtained, they are quickly attended to through the initiation of a ceremony with music, food, and the offering that the *zār* has demanded. Otherwise, the demands will be met at a later time in a similar ceremony. For example, if the *zār* asks for a sacrifice or blood, there will be a ceremony where the sacrificial animal is brought in (with the patient riding it) and slaughtered, after which the blood is drunk by the leader and the patient. At this point, the incorporation phase is completed, the patient becomes a member of the cult and is expected to participate in all future ceremonies. These ceremonies may take up to seven days beyond the separation phase. Members of the cult must follow certain rules regarding their outfits (which should always be clean and white) and must adhere to prohibitions on the touching of corpses (animal or human), the drinking of alcohol, sex with unlawful partners (Sā’edi, pp. 36-37). Selling or letting go of the object the *zār*



has asked for is prohibited as well; if the *zār* has asked for an outfit or an accessory, the patient must have that particular outfit/accessory on in all future ceremonies (Sabaye Moghaddam, p. 28). It is believed that if these rules are broken, the *zārs* will rise again, thus necessitating another ceremony to appease them (Interviews 2007, 2009).

Many similarities amongst the beliefs and the rituals associated with *zār* in Iran and many African countries suggest a common origin for this belief and practice. The dominant presence of Africans amongst both the afflicted and the healers also point to the possibility that the belief and practice might have originated in Africa (Modarressi; Natvig, pp. 675-89) and gained popularity in ports in south west of Iran. At the turn of the 20th century, scholars generally favored an Abyssinian or Ethiopian origin for *zār* though there were also theories that proposed Persian or other origins (Natvig, pp. 671-85). Frobenius, speculating upon the cultural traits common between Persia, northeast Africa and the Sudan region, developed the hypothesis that *zār* and *bori* (an old West African religion of the Hausa clan structure; Lewis, 1971, p. 96) were manifestations of an early system of beliefs derived from Persia and spread throughout the grassland belt from the Abyssinian highlands through Kordofan to Hausaland (Frobenius, pp. 569-72). Meanwhile Modarressi (p. 150) states that the name *zār* is Persian and was applied to the cult when it was introduced in southern Iran by African sailors from the southeast coast of Africa in the 16th century. According to Mirzai Asl, Africans brought to Iran as a result of slave trade activities in the 19th century have held on to their African heritage by reconstructing their identity (Mirzai Asl, pp. 240-42). It is difficult to trace the origin of these beliefs and rituals in Iran as Ethiopians have been mentioned to be living in southeast Iran at the time of Herodotus (Field, p. 155); however, there are no written records of practices associated with them before the 20th century.

Close to half a century of government opposition to these practices (Sā'edi, p. 25; Interviews, 2007) has forced the believers to scale back the extent of the ceremonies, which may have in turn resulted in their disappearance from many regions including Bušehr. The advent of modern medicine and hospitals could also have influenced the way people of the region viewed and dealt with illness. Despite these factors, *zār* beliefs and practices have not ceased to exist in Iran and many other countries in the Middle East and Africa.

For a music sample, see [Zār Songs: Vorāra, Yo mama](#).



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(Maria Sabaye Moghaddam)

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