



## Muslims or Shamans: Blacks of the Persian Gulf

by  
Iraj Bashiri  
Copyright, Iraj Bashiri, 1983

Ghulam Hussein Sa'edi, an Iranian physician with anthropological interests, has presented an extensive study of the maladies that afflict the black communities of the Persian Gulf. The local people attribute these diseases to the "Winds" or *baads*. Sa'edi has also provided detailed information on the type of rituals performed to control the power of the Winds.<sup>1</sup> Building on Sa'edi's study of the *ahl-i hava* (lit., people of the air),<sup>2</sup> the present study endeavors to ascertain the origin of the black Muslims of the Gulf and, through their rituals and instruments, relate them to the Thonga-Bantu cultures of southeastern Africa, their most-likely original homeland. These blacks, the present author believes, were brought to the Persian Gulf by Portuguese slave traders as early as the sixteenth century.

### Explanation for maps:

Top left: location on the Gulf where certain winds are found

Bottom left: Thonga lands from where the *zar* winds arrive

Right: general distribution of the winds in Iran and in East Africa.

Legend (if unreadable):

al-Mashayekh (grey)

Zar (dark green)

Nuban (yellow);

Jinn (light green)

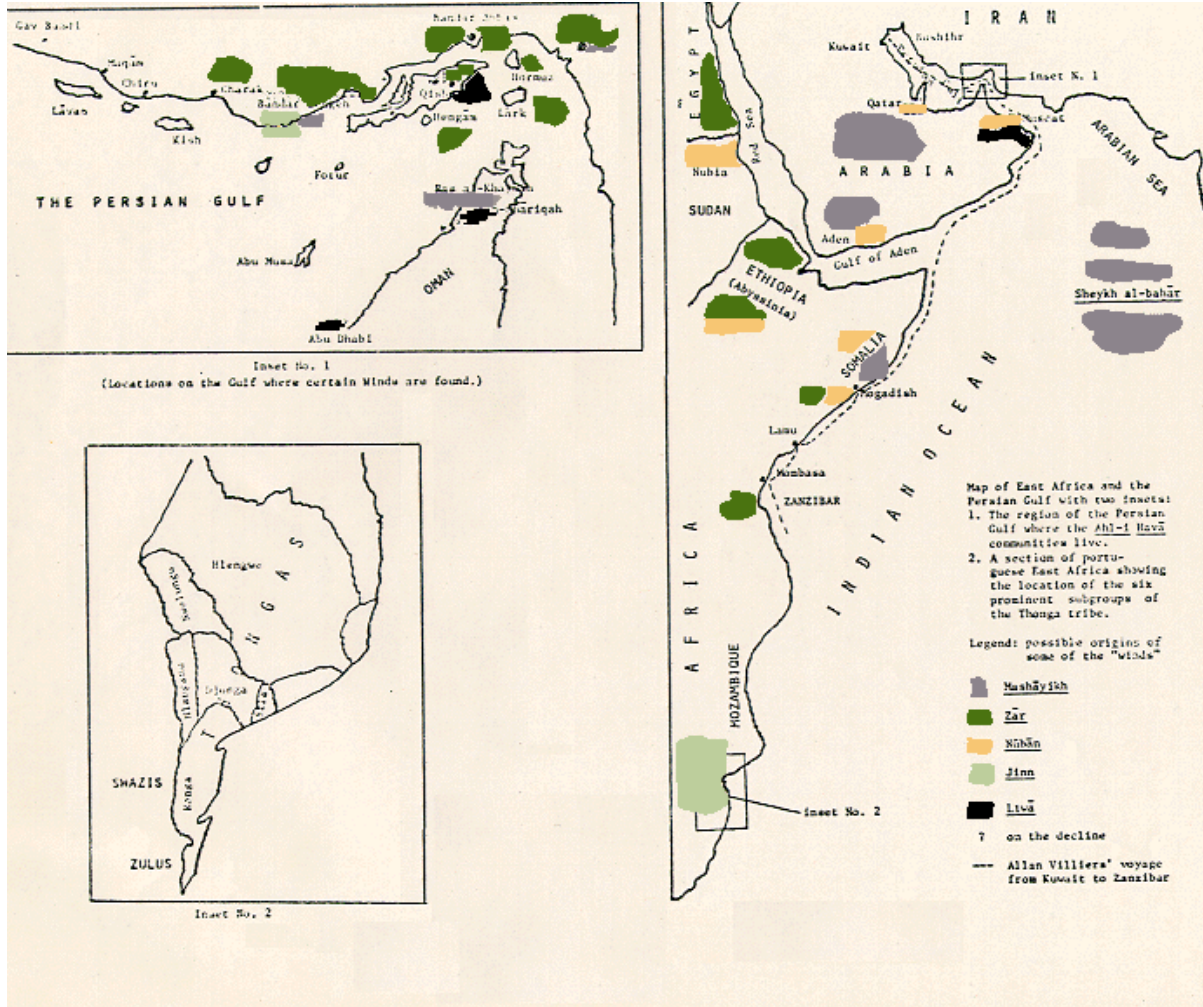
Liva (black).

---

<sup>1</sup> For Sa'edi's contribution, see Sa'edi, 1967, in the bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> For the meaning of *hava*, see section V, below.

## Muslims or Shamans: Blacks of the Persian Gulf



### I. Introduction

Since ancient times, the Persian Gulf, an arm of the Arabian Sea between southwest Iran and Arabia, has been the fulcrum of trade between Africa and Asia. The history of the slave trade in the region, however, dates to the early medieval times when Muslim traders transferred slaves from Zanzibar and Abyssinia (Ethiopia) to the Persian Gulf for distribution throughout the Islamic Empire.<sup>3</sup> Later on, the Africans themselves, serving as *nakhudas* (sailors) aboard the dhows and booms voyaging between Mozambique, Zanzibar, and Kuwait, became involved in the maritime life of the Gulf. As a result of this expansion, several ethnically mixed communities (Indo-Iranian and African) mushroomed around the Gulf. The inhabitants of Qishm, Lark, Minab, Lingih, Bandar Abbas, and of several other small communities on the shore of the Gulf are included in this mix. Within each community, however, the blacks, distinguished by robust bodies, flat noses, thick lips, black eyes, and black curly hair are easily distinguished. Due to

<sup>3</sup> See Bolukbashi, 1969, pp. 527-31.

their alleged servile ancestry, they are kept in abject poverty by the Indo-Iranian groups.<sup>4</sup> Two theories of the origins of these people have been advanced. The first theory relates them to the aborigines on the Iranian plateau before the advent of the Indo-Iranians. According to this theory, these "ugly natives" were subjugated and enslaved by the invaders. The poverty in which these communities live today is presented as support for their servile stance and for their lack of initiative to better their own lives. The second theory relates them to the slave trade. They are the descendants of slaves, this theory argues who, after the end of the slave trade, remained in these parts and propagated.<sup>5</sup> The argument for pre-Aryan ancestry of the *ahl-i hava* lacks supported both textually and culturally. The only concept that could play a key role in relating these ancient and present-day communities is the ancient concept of the *vati* or wind. *Vati*, however, is not known to afflict the individuals and drive them to the brink of madness. Neither are there rituals in the Indo-Iranian culture that make use of the precise instruments used by the *ahl-i hava*. Therefore, we shall not pursue the first theory any further. The vitality of the second theory rests on the existence of pertinent documents showing correspondences in belief patterns as well as in rituals between the Bantu-Thonga cultures of Africa and the *ahl-i hava*. The preliminary research of Sa'edi on the *ahl-i hava* and the life-work of Henri A. Junod reveal just such correspondences. It is, therefore, the second theory which this article seeks to examine further and support.

## II. The *Ahl-i Hava*

The people of *hava* live in the region of Minab, the townships between the ports of Lingih and Bushihr as well as on the island of Bab Hurmuz. The curious thing about these people is that they worship the Winds (*baad*), but they have no knowledge either of the source of these Winds or of the reason for the centrality of the Winds in their belief system. In general, they attribute their belief in Winds to tradition. Only some of their leaders make vague references to an African origin for the mysterious Winds. This paper is concerned with this aspect of the lives of the *ahl-i hava*. The people of *hava* believe that the Winds arrive at the Gulf from their source in far-away lands and choose a "steed" (the patient is called a steed). An individual afflicted by a Wind will make certain "possessed" gestures and say certain things in languages known only to the *babas* (male shamans) or *mamas* (female shamans) of that particular Wind. These Winds, which usually afflict the destitute, demand blood sacrifice, special gifts, and special melodies on the drum. These last are performed in special assemblies of poetry recitation (*bazi*).<sup>6</sup> Once the

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 530. See also Sa'edi, 1967, pp. 6-7 as well as Sadid al-Saltanah, 1964, p. 158.

<sup>5</sup> See Sadid al-Saltanah, op. cit., pp. 360-63.

<sup>6</sup> The *ahl-i hava* are a sedentary people. Their songs and dances, however, are more international and tribal in nature. Alan Villiers, probably the last of the adventurers to board the dhows and booms of old, records similar instruments, songs and dances performed on board the "Triumph of Righteousness" by African *Nakhudas* or sailors. See pages 175-78, for details. Villiers observes that the sailors' deep-seated convictions that disease was caused by evil *jinn*s who could be scared off by song and dance could in no way be influenced by new, Western ideas. See pages 210, 275, 331-32 and 373. Sa'edi, op. cit., p. 5, reports that according to the *ahl-i hava* themselves, their forefathers were brought to the Persian Gulf about four generations ago. They consider East Africa, especially Somalia and Zanzibar, to be their original homeland. Indeed, the ancestors of the *ahl-i hava* have their own horror stories detailing their first confrontation with the whites. Even today, they still relate how their ancestors believed that the whites intended to capture, kill, and eat them.

demands of the Wind are met, it relinquishes its hold on its steed; the individual becomes a member of the *ahl-i hava*, i.e., becomes one who can live out of harm's way.

**Pictured:** *Dervish, Baba-zar of Qishm Island*



Social status, living conditions, and affiliation with the sea are some of the main criteria for admission to the ranks of the *hava*. Usually, beachcombers, fishermen, sailors (in general, the unprotected--those who cannot promise offerings) are struck down by the Winds. Pearl divers, merchants, and captains of the dhows and booms are usually not afflicted--they remain undisturbed (*saf*). It is believed that most Winds originate in distant jungles in Africa, in the deserts of Arabia, and in India. Only a few originate in Iran. The capacity of these Winds to do harm depends on the level of protection that the community offers its members. If the community as a whole shows signs of adversity, as it did in the early 1930's when many merchants and pearl divers left the seaports in favor of protection of small Shaykhdoms, the Winds descend and kill many.<sup>7</sup> When the main threats, like compulsory education and military service or forced unveiling of women disappeared, the Winds disappear as well.

### III. The Rituals of the *Ahl-i Hava*

When an individual becomes ill, he is brought to a physician. If the doctor fails to diagnose and cure the disease, the patient is taken to a local religious man (*mulla*) who is, supposedly endowed with esoteric knowledge gained through prayers. If the *mulla's* prayers and talismans also fail, the patient is taken to a shaman. Each shaman can cure only one Wind, but all shamans can diagnose the Wind or the cause of the disease. Thus, if this shaman cannot cure the patient, he will refer the patient to a shaman who can. For instance, Baba-'Ayud, who resides in Bandar

---

<sup>7</sup> For the migration of the Gulf inhabitants see Villiers, 1969, pp. 295-97.

Lingih, cures the *Nuban* Wind. If a patient not afflicted with *Nuban* is brought to Baba-'Ayud, the shaman "lowers" his own Wind (which, unlike the patient's, is *saf*, or tame) and through that medium diagnoses the type of Wind with which the individual is afflicted. The shaman who is capable of treatment isolates (*hijab*) the patient for a period of three days to two weeks, depending on the nature and identity of the afflicting Wind. During this isolation, the patient is forbidden to look at dogs and chickens and is barred from sexual activities. The shaman brings the patient's food to the isolation hut which is, usually, located on the shore of the sea. During the night the patient's body is massaged with an ointment made up of some twenty-one herbs (*qaraku*) and spices brought mostly from India. On the last day of the isolation period, when the shaman is sure that the patient is ready for the ceremony of exorcism (*bazi*), he mixes (*qaraku*) with the leaves of seven thornless plants and dirt gathered from seven roads. This compound, instead of plain *qaraku*,<sup>8</sup> is used as the last ointment to massage the body of the patient. When the application is finished, the shaman asks the bamboo lady--a lady with a bamboo stick responsible for informing all the *ahl-i hava*, especially the *doxtaran-i hava* "girls or daughters of the air," to assemble the community in the patient's hut for the *bazi* (exorcism). Before presenting the patient at the assembly, the shaman prepares to "lower" the patient's Wind. For this he instructs the patient to lie prone on the floor. He then ties the patient's big toes together with a piece of goat hair and rubs a special fish oil beneath his nostrils. Skimping around and brandishing his bamboo stick (*bakol*), or sticks, the shaman threatens the evil spirit (*jinn*), advising him to leave the patient's body. In time, screaming and howling, the (*jinn*), or the evil cause of the illness, prepares to leave the patient. Now the patient is ready to be presented at the ritual where his Wind will be lowered. If the bamboo lady has done her job properly, the place will be filled with the *ahl-i hava*. The daughters of *hava*, known for their colorful dresses, harmonious gait, and free association with men, add richness to the dance scene. They also serve as an incentive to those who might otherwise not attend the ceremonies. Some spectators, former "steeds themselves," come to lower their own Wind, since the sound of the drums, the dance, and the poetry recitation are known to help lower one's Wind without consulting a shaman, giving gifts, or offering a sacrifice. For the assembly, three types of drums are used: *Modendo* is the *ahl-i hava's* biggest drum, *Gap Dohol* is also a big drum. *Kesar* is a small drum. In the *bazi*, the drums are lined up along a straight line. A small pot of fire (*Gashtah Suz*) in which a medicinal substance (*kondruk*) is burned, is placed directly in front of the line of drums.<sup>9</sup> All varieties of fresh Gulf fruits, flowers, and vegetables are piled in abundance on a tablecloth in the middle of the tent. Flesh of a sacrificed animal and a basin of fresh blood are also required to be placed on the tablecloth. The sacrifice, usually a goat, is killed on the spot. At a certain point in the ceremony the shaman will ask the patient to drink the fresh blood, for it is believed that the drinking of fresh blood will bring down the Wind. Drinking blood is also a status symbol among the *ahl-i hava*. Every shaman has drunk fresh blood at least once. Some who have consumed it many times are able to treat more than one Wind. Mama Hanifa of Qishm, for instance, treats the *Zar* as well as the *Nuban* Winds.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Sa'idi, op., cit., pp. 43, 163.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 44, 156-166. Cf., Westermarck, 1968, vol. 1, pp. 324-25 for a possible reason for the use of fire in these ceremonies.

<sup>10</sup> Sa'idi, op. cit., p. 32.



**Pictured:** *Hanifa: Mama-zar of Qishm Island*

When all is in readiness, the shaman approaches the *Modendo* and strikes it. Then he circles the tent, strikes the drum and begins to sing. Some shamans recite poetry instead of singing. If the Wind diagnosed is a pagan Wind, the songs will be in Swahili. The shaman need not know Swahili in order to sing in that language. If the Wind is a Muslim Wind, the shaman will sing in Arabic. The audience then begins to sing along, in Swahili or Arabic as the case may be, even though in southern Persia few people know Swahili.<sup>11</sup> As the tempo of the drum increases the patient, sitting next to the shaman, becomes increasingly restless until, finally he lapses into convulsions. The convulsions which begin with a slight shaking of the head gradually lead to violent and vigorous spasms of the whole body. When this shaking reaches a climax, the patient reaches for the basin of fresh blood and drinks.<sup>12</sup> Suddenly his Wind is lowered and he loses consciousness. Others who have been afflicted by the Winds in previous times may, at this moment, lower their own Winds and lose consciousness as well. Each Wind responds to a particular beat of the drums. It is up to the shaman and the *Kesar* player to produce the right beat for the Wind diagnosed. Once this beat is produced, the Wind begins to move in the patient's body and eventually lowers itself. Now the shaman talks to the Wind and hears its demands. Once these demands are met, or a promise is made that they will be met at a future date, the Wind leaves. Sometimes, however, after many nights and days of song and dance (*bazi*), a Wind may refuse to release its steed. Such an unfortunate person is considered incurable (*tahran*) by the *ahl-i hava*. Such patients, thought to be chosen to die, are taken to the desert and abandoned.<sup>13</sup> The demands of the Winds are varied. Some demand a small gift, a simple bamboo stick, for instance. This is a bamboo without any knot or (*bol*). Others, more demanding, ask for bamboo sticks with gold and silver knots, for more bamboo sticks (up to seventeen, in one

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 46. See also page 5 for language competency.

<sup>12</sup> In some cases, instead of a basin full of fresh blood, the patient is provided with a basin full of water to which several drops of blood have been added. Such a basin is usually used for those Winds which are not violent and whose demands are not strong.

<sup>13</sup> Sa'idi, op. cit., p. 51.

instance), or for fine materials, silk shirts, gold rings, or other valuables. On behalf of the patient, the shaman promises that the Wind will receive all the gifts it has asked for. If the patient cannot supply all these immediately, a time-table is set according to which, in a similar assembly, the Wind will receive them. If the patient neglects to fulfill his promise, the Wind will strike him a second time. Once it has stated its demands, the Wind is ready to leave the patient's body. To facilitate this departure, the shaman has the patient face Mecca (*qibla*) and makes sure that his head is not touching the floor. Then he asks the patient to beat his chest as hard as he can. This process forces the evil aspect of the Wind (*jinn*) out of the body. Once the *jinn* is out, the remaining, benign qualities of the wind, now sighted (*bina*) and acquainted with music and dance, enable the new *ahl-i hava* to discern what he heretofore could not. Although attendance at the rituals is free, there are certain restrictions. When the last part of the ceremony is being performed, the audience must keep absolutely silent. One who opens his mouth to speak or to yawn is likely to allow the departing evil spirit to slip into his mouth and make *him* sick. All Winds are contagious. In some ceremonies, there are also restrictions on wearing shoes and on drinking tea.<sup>14</sup> Failure to observe these restrictions is punishable by lashes of the bamboo stick (*hadd*), administered by the shaman.

**Pictured:** *a zar patient*



The ceremonies for all Winds follow roughly the same pattern. The Winds, however, originate in different places and each is surrounded by different beliefs and superstitions. Some Winds are pagan while others are Muslim; some come from known regions of Africa and Arabia, while others, such as *jinn*s or *dibs*, find their sources in the nebulous native superstitions. It seems that, like people everywhere, the blacks of the Persian Gulf experience acute cases of depression which, depending on the severity of each case, they identify with a Wind. The person or persons who have successfully overcome these depressions, the so-called *babas* and *mamas*, serve as "guides" in helping other afflicted individuals to recover. As we shall see later, the ceremonies of the *ahl-i hava* include an elements of growing up. They serve as a landmark separating the adult from the less-mature individuals in the community; the distinction, however, is not age oriented but rather emphasizes a capability to control one's self and to withstand psychological disturbances brought about by deprivation and hardship. The culture of the *ahl-i hava* is based on African cultures. Thus depression, low spirits accentuated by poverty, is

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 52. See also Donaldson, 1973, p. 183.

counterbalanced by music which elevates the spirit and by gifts which stimulate the patient's spirit of giving. Association with the Indo-Iranian and Islamic cultures of Iran and with the Indian subcontinent through trade has greatly enriched the lives of the *ahl-i hava*. Consequently, as we shall see, elements of Shi'ism and Sufism have been added to the rituals, making them both colorful and mystical. Particularly the latter aspect has established some *babas* and *mamas* as mystical Islamic saints whose spirits guide the community.

### IV. The Winds

The *ahl-i hava* believe in many Winds and a great many sub-Winds. What follows is a cursory survey of some of the Winds and of their prominent characteristics and powers:

1. The *Zar* Winds
2. Each of the 72 Winds of the major *Zar* group (pagan killer winds) receives special attention in the Gulf. With them is associated an hereditary caste of shamans (*baba-Zar* and *mama-Zar*) made up of well-known blacks of servile ancestry.
3. The Amharic word *Zar*, referring to popular belief in a *jinn-i Zar* who becomes incarnate in certain human beings, was introduced from Ethiopia and the Sudan into Egypt first and into the Gulf region later. In Egypt, for example, a woman known as the *Shaykha* or '*Arif al-Sikka* performs exorcistic ceremonies closely resembling those described above for the *ahl-i hava*.<sup>15</sup>
4. The *Mashayikh* Winds
5. This prominent, non-violent group of Winds originates in Aden, in Arabia, and in the Persian Gulf. As their name indicates, they are Muslim Winds; they accept dedications (*nadhr*) and respond favorably to the intermediacy of a *Shaykh*, i.e., to the spirit of a devoted and pious Muslim.
6. The *Mashayikh* group differs from the *Zar* group in its association with the Islamic (Shi'ite to be exact) concept of intercession (such as an *Imam* would intervene), and in its non-violence. Indeed, although these Winds may make their steeds quite sick, they are not known to have killed anyone. Like the *Zar* Winds, the *Mashayikhs* draw on Thonga-like rites of exorcism. The nature of the supreme deity remains quite vague.<sup>16</sup> The *Shaykh* functions as the *Imam*, and his spirit intervenes on behalf of the *baba* for the patient.
7. The recognition of the *Shaykh* as a source of "esoteric" knowledge, or as one learned in the Sufi tradition, and his intercession on behalf of the patient, belong to higher levels of the system. On lower levels, too, there are interesting correspondences. Unlike *Zar* exorcisms, which are usually performed in the patient's hut, the *Mashayikhs* assemblies have to meet in special sanctuaries called *ghadamgahs*. The *ghadamgahs* function as *Imamzadehs*, a Shi'ite holy place where the assistance of an *Imam* can be sought. When going to these shrines as a group, the Muslims carry special flags called '*alam*'; similar

---

<sup>15</sup> For details see Cerulli's article on *Zar* in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, IV, p. 1217. See also Westermarck, *op. cit.*, p. 379. Note especially the latter's remark in relation to the *Zar*'s origins in the belief systems of black slaves from the negro tribes of tropical Africa, and the resemblance of their rites to those of the *Masubori* in Hausaland.

<sup>16</sup> Bastide, 1965, p. 522.



flags are required from those who attend a patient in a *Mashayikhs* assembly.<sup>17</sup> The *ghadamgah* of at least one *Mashayikh* Wind, the *Shaykh al-Bahar*, is located at the bottom of the sea. It is not clear why this particular Wind should be treated differently, but it seems that only the pearlers, *Nakhudas*, and captains are concerned with this Wind. It may be that certain economic and/or political conditions have isolated this Muslim Wind from the rest. A discovery of the nature of this Wind may account for the sudden death or disappearance of many a pearl diver, *Nakhuda*, or captain on the high seas.

8. The *Jinn* Winds
9. These pagan Winds which originate in Iranian popular beliefs as well as in Muscat are very cunning and dangerous. They ambush their helpless victims in banyan thickets, around abandoned water reservoirs, and near water wells. Although they typically demand a blood sacrifice, these Winds do not demand fresh blood. A drop of blood in a basin of water satisfies them.<sup>18</sup>
10. Iranian Winds
11. These are very gentle Winds, usually named after superstitious beliefs in Iranian traditions.<sup>19</sup> They are supposed to be represented by giants (*ghul*) and fairies (*Pari*) but these giants and fairies are only vaguely felt.<sup>20</sup>
12. The *Liwa* Winds
13. These are a still more curious set of Winds. They rise in Muscat and are non-violent. In the assemblies offered to the *Liwa* Winds more than seventy people may dance at a time, creating a joyous and boisterous scene. These assemblies have quite often been disbanded for political reasons.<sup>21</sup>

---

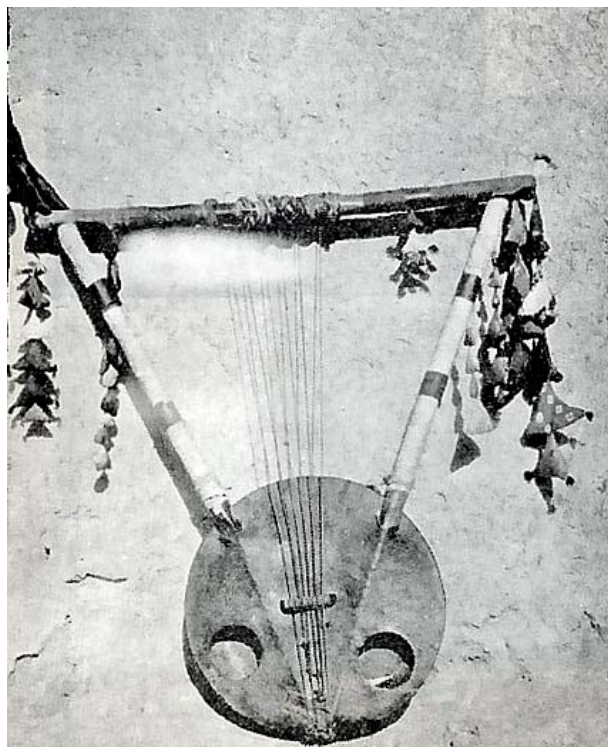
<sup>17</sup> Sa'idi. op. cit., pp. 104-5.

<sup>18</sup> Cf., Westermarck, op. cit., p. 292. He remarks that a similar distinction is made between the Muhammadan *jinn*s and evil *jinn*s in Dakkala; see also Sa'edi, op. cit., p. 123; and footnote 12 above. There seems to be a tendency on the Gulf to deemphasize the importance of blood, a fundamental change if it continues. Cf., p. 70 for a similar Zar Wind called Chinyasa.

<sup>19</sup> Donaldson, op. cit., pp. 35-47; Westermarck, op. cit., pp. 262-390.

<sup>20</sup> For a full description of the types of Winds, their capabilities and characteristics, and the full list of instruments used in each *bazi* see Sa'edi, op. cit., pp. 41-128 and 157-166.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127. For the Iranian government's opposition to holding assemblies, see p. 25.



**Pictured:** a sacred instrument for driving the Nuban wind away

## V. The Thonga and the *ahl-i hava*

A careful study of the beliefs and rituals of East Africa reveals interesting correspondences with those of *ahl-i hava*; correspondences that might eventually relate these neglected communities in the Hormuz Straits to the people of the Horn of Africa and beyond. Since, in a brief study, it would be impossible to study these relations comprehensively, we shall examine some of the beliefs and rituals of the Thonga/Bantu tribe, attempting to show the similarities that exist between their rituals and those of the *ahl-i hava*. Our study may also point out, in a marginal way, the importance of the Hormuz Straits as a "melting pot" wherein diverse cultures and their inter-relationships can be studied in depth.<sup>22</sup> The Thonga believe that disease is caused

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf., for instance, the belief system of the Nuer (a subgroup of the East African Nilot tribes). There, a distinction is made between higher and lower deities in the pantheon. The latter are called "Spirits of the Air," and relate to the higher gods in the same way that the "spirits" relate to the Thonga god Tilo, the sky god. The same relationship also holds between the Winds and Allah in the belief system of the *ahl-i hava*.

In the Nuer tradition, the "Spirits of the Air" inspire prophets to organize and direct raids. The raids bring in cattle for future sacrifice, and sacrifice brings about an abundance of cattle for future sacrifices (Cf. Lincoln, 1976, especially pp. 74-76). With respect to sacrifice as an invitation to abundance, it should be added that although the *ahl-i hava's* economic and ecological bases have changed, some of the basic principles of their belief system have remained the same. They still believe in sacrifice, but along with a gift of sacrifice they now offer silk cloth, perfumes, gold rings, and other such urban items brought to the Gulf by merchants, or by smugglers (Cf. Villiers, pp. 158 and 310). Westermarck also refers to some similarities in the beliefs of the inhabitants of northern Africa, see Westermarck, *op. cit.*, p. 379. This is not to mention the great possibility that similar cultural and religious ties may also exist between the Bantu/Thonga, the *ahl-i hava* and some Indian tribes like the Munda.

by unhappy spirits who dwell in specially maintained thickets and groves, around rivers, and close to habitations where they had lived before their demise. All worship is directed to these spirits. An important point concerning these carriers of disease or "madness of the gods" is that they are not confined to the same thickets and groves. When the Thonga migrate, they migrate with all their members, spirits, and *gobelas*. The *gobela* (shaman or priest) is acquainted with rituals necessary to ensure deliverance of the tribe from the torments of these spirits.<sup>23</sup> When a Thonga tribesman is attacked by one of these spirits (the first sign of possession seems to be a nervous crisis), he is taken to a priest or shaman *gobela* who performs a ceremony of exorcism characterized by drum performances, an ablution in the *gobo* cabalash and the drinking of fresh blood. These elaborate ceremonies for the possessed are described by Junod in great detail, a brief summary is presented here.<sup>24</sup> Through a process of casting bones, an appropriate shaman is assigned. He will, as a first step, confine his patient to a special hut. Soon he brings his drum and joins the patient. Once the necessary preparations have been made, the shaman beats the drum and announces the beginning of a ceremony which may continue for as long as the spirit chooses to persist and torment the patient. This may take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. It is customary in these events for people not to leave the ceremonial tent, even if the procedure takes a week or two. During these long hours, the dancers beg, cajole, and threaten the spirit, imploring it to release its victim. Everyone stays with the patient. Meals are served in the ceremonial tent and there are places where tired participants can rest. Ultimately, the patient, even if not familiar with the Zulu language, will cry out in Zulu. Through the medium of the patient, the spirit informs the shaman about his own name and the name or names of his companions. At the end of this stage, the patient is ready to undergo the *gobo* rites, for which the shaman provides a special liquid in which the patient dips his head, deep enough to cover his eyes. When the patient reports that his eyes are burning, the shaman orders him to open his eyes. The space before the patient's eyes is red and patterned with small black dots moving to and fro. This rite, actually an initiation rite, ensures that the patient has "crossed the sea" and that he has "seen everything." Appeasement by fresh blood (*ku thwaza*) is the first demand of every possessing spirit. It is only after the shaman promises that the spirit will be treated to the fresh blood of a sacrificed animal that it begins to speak. Although a fowl's blood is sufficient, usually a he-goat (for a female patient) or a she-goat (for a male) is sacrificed. The animal is brought to the patient's tent and stabbed, whereupon the patient begins to drink in a frenzy from the opened veins of the sacrifice until he has had his fill. Once he has drunk enough blood, the patient is removed from the animal and taken to the back of the tent. Here his uvula is tickled with a feather until he vomits all the blood. Now duly appeased, the spirit takes the blood and leaves. The patient is then washed and made ready for further purification rituals (*hondlola*) before he reenters the community. As is evident from the brief outline above and the correspondences that follow, many of the "possession" rites of the spirit-worshiping Thonga correspond to the healing ceremonies of the *ahl-i hava* in the course of which they appease the "Winds":

---

<sup>23</sup> Junod, 1962, vol. 2, pp. 479-481.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 482-93.

<i>ahl-i hava</i>	Thonga/Bantu
1. patient is taken to an exorcist	same
2. exorcist consults his own Wind, diagnoses disease, refers the patient to appropriate shaman	exorcist consults bones, bones diagnose disease, assign appropriate shaman
3. patient is confined to a hut	same
4. the <i>ahl-i hava</i> are informed through the bamboo lady	the drum beat signals the forthcoming ceremony
5. the shaman frightens the <i>jinn</i> , drives it out, and speaks to the Wind	the shaman talks to the spirit
6. demands of the Wind are expressed	demands of the spirit are expressed
7. the ceremony lasts up to two weeks	same
8. blood sacrifice	same
9. drinking of blood	same
10. demands of the Wind are met	demands of the spirit are met
11. departure of the evil <i>jinn</i> , through the blood	departure of evil spirit through the blood

The above chart indicates that the song and dance assemblies of the *ahl-i hava* and the religious ceremonies of some parts of East Africa have a great deal in common. What distinguishes the Winds from each other must thus be sought in higher levels where these ceremonies become effective. In other words, the spiritual relations strengthen the ties between man and the supreme deity; the rituals merely aid in focusing attention. Originally the *Zar* Winds forced a *jinn* spirit into an individual's body to give him supernatural power. On the Gulf, this is modified. The *jinn*, already residing in the victim's body, has made that person sick. The *jinn*, must be forced out. Furthermore, a distinction is made between a good *jinn* and a bad one, and the bad *jinn* is held responsible for the *Zar*-stricken person's calamity. No mention is made of the "good" or helpful *jinn Zar*. As we have seen, the procedures outlined above for lowering the *Zar* are the same for both south and north Africa; the evil nature of the *jinn*, however, belongs exclusively to the south. What happens along the Persian Gulf seems to be a compromise between south and north African rituals. The name comes from Ethiopia; the practice comes from South Africa, but the principle upon which the *Zar* ceremony is explained in Iran is neither; it can be interpreted both in Ethiopian and South African terms.

**Pictured:** in the foreground, a *ghadamgah* where the *Ahl-i Hava* perform their rituals



Intermarriage with Arabs and Iranians has changed the physical features of the *ahl-i hava* (see photographs provided by Sa'edi), but more than that it has changed the principles upon which some of the Winds draw. The most drastically influenced are the *Mashayikh* group which, though they use similar rites of exorcism to scare off an evil *jinn*, follow a totally *Shi'ite* belief system. Belief in *Allah*, belief in intercession (by a *Shaykh*), the institution of the *ghadamgah*, and the uses of *'alam* (banner), and *nadhr* (dedication). All these are reminiscent of the *Shi'ites'* practice of the *'azadari* in an *imamzadih*. In the case of the *Mashayikh*, it is hard to decide whether these Winds were invented by the *babas*, modeled upon native rituals and beliefs to help out Muslim neighbors, or if, conversely, these practices were forced on the community by the *Shi'ite* clergy residing in the surrounding villages and towns. The existence of the evil *jinn* in the patient's body is South African; the procedures for exorcising it, however, are almost entirely Islamized. There is much we do not know about the origin, development, and the impact of these events; it can, however, be asserted that quite different forces, ranging from economical and political to social and religious are at work here. These differences are reflected in the *jinn* Wind which seems to have retained much of its original mystique, the *Mashayikh* which are most nearly Muslim, and the *Liwa*, which have given way to more fun than faith.

### V. The Persian Word *baad*

The modern Persian word *baad* (wind) is derived from *va* meaning "to blow." *Vata* or *Vayu* is the deity in charge of atmospheric changes, and was the first to accept sacrifices.<sup>25</sup> In the *Yashts*, this deity appears three times in the form of an angel.<sup>26</sup> During the Sassanian era, when traditional Zoroastrianism was giving way to a more orthodox form, *Vayu* was split into two: a guardian of pure and beneficial atmospheric changes, and an embodiment of impure and harmful

---

<sup>25</sup> Dihkhuda, *The Lughatnama*, 1969, letter B, p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> These *Yashts* are *Mihr Yasht*, 9; *Rashn Yasht*, 4; and *Farvardin Yasht*, 47.

atmospheric forces. The *Vendidad* couples this demon *Vayu* with the demon of death, as if retracing the origin of the destructive *Vayu* to the Vedic *Indra-Vayu*.<sup>27</sup> With the advent of Islam and the Muslims' maritime power, the word *baad* became synonymous with the Arabic word *rih* and began to be used in a more practical sense. For example, the winds were classified according to their force, duration, and destructive or beneficial powers: Sakinah is *bad-i tiz row* or swift-moving wind, Sajujat is *bad-i peyvasteh vazan* or continuously-blowing wind, and many others.<sup>28</sup> Finally, traditional medicine or *yunani tibb* regarded wind as one of the major causes of certain diseases. These winds, however, were produced in the body as a result of certain chemical reactions.<sup>29</sup> Though these latter winds are directly related to sickness, they do not correspond to the Winds with which the *ahl-i hava* are afflicted. Neither are such traditional medicines as wine, prescribed to cure chemically produced winds, are administered by the *babas* and *mamas* of the *ahl-i hava*. As is evident, the most we can squeeze out of the ancient and medieval meanings of *baad* are the ideas related to beneficial and harmful atmospheric forces. The concept of tormenting spirits that can be calmed only by a blood sacrifice is absent. For these reasons, we must conclude that there are no links between Iran's pre-Indo-Iranian culture and the current beliefs of the *ahl-i hava*.<sup>30</sup> Returning to *baad*, is it possible that this word may include a meaning that is lost in translation? We know that besides the word *baad* the *ahl-i hava* use the Arabic translation of this word, *rih* quite consistently, and this Arabic word is related closely to another Arabic word *ruh*. As Jung has noted, the word *ruh* signifies both "breath" and "spirit."<sup>31</sup> Might it not be possible, therefore, that the original translations from the Arabic disregarded the fact that the modern Persian *baad* and *hava* are devoid of the spiritual connotations of *rih*, and that this omission might have brought about the breakdown in communication between the *ahl-i hava* and the communities to which they might have once belonged? Viewed from this semantic perspective, it seems that both the Thonga and the *ahl-i hava* are preoccupied with the worship of the "Spirits of the Air," an East African group of lower gods or spirits. One calls them the spirit of deceased people, while the other calls them the "Winds" in the *rih* or even the *ruh* sense.

## VI. Conclusion

This article has been an attempt to understand the ties between some obscure communities on the Persian Gulf and the outside world. It points to a need for further research on the anthropological, sociological, linguistic, and religious aspects of this misplaced community. As a preliminary investigation into the origins of the black communities of the Persian Gulf, this study reveals two things. Firstly, that these black communities are in reality sub-cultures with strong

---

<sup>27</sup> Zaehner, 1961, p. 149.

<sup>28</sup> Dikhuda, op. cit., letter B, p. 194. See also Sadid al-Saltana, op. cit., pp. 289-290.

<sup>29</sup> Sadid al-Saltana, op. cit., pp. 199, 204, 223, 227, and 247.

<sup>30</sup> Before leaving the subject of Iranian, it should be pointed out that although *baad* as such may not relate to the guardian of the souls of the righteous, the *Farahvashis* may. The function of the *Farahvashi* as a gentle force that nurtures man, beast and plant, however, differs from the function of the Winds lurking in thickets, rivers, and mountains ready to pounce on unprotected, destitute victims. Although martial in nature, the *Farahvashis* are not known to victimize or be violent. For further detail see Lincoln, op. cit., p. 218. See also Boyce, 1975, vol. 1, pp. 119-120; and Taqizadeh, 1938, pp. 49ff.

<sup>31</sup> See Cirlot, 1963, p. 353.

ritual as well as spiritual ties to the Thonga/Bantu tribes of Africa. Secondly, that since these people have been in constant contact with the *Shi'ite* Muslims of southern Iran, they have incorporated the fundamental beliefs of this sect into their original worship of the spirits of their deceased ancestors. The result is a fascinating blend of shamanism and Islam, complete with rituals, rites, and pageantry. Future research will no doubt reveal more of the hidden features of this little-known corner of the globe. That the Portuguese who brought these African natives to the Gulf took many to India as well makes future research about these people that much more intriguing.

## Selected Bibliography

- Bastide, R. "Bantu Tribes of the South and the East," *Larousse World Mythology*, Hamline Publishing Group Ltd., 1965, pp. 522-23.
- Behnam, Jamshid. "Population," *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 1. Cambridge University Press, 1968, pp. 468-89.
- Bolukbashi, Ali. "Chahbahar wa Baluchha-i an," *Majalla-i Danishkada-i Adabiyat wa 'Ulum-i Insani*, vol. 16, nos. 5&6, Tehran, 1969.
- Boyce, Mary. *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, E. J. Brill, 1975.
- Cerulli, Enrico. "Zar," *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 4.
- Cirlot, J. E. *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Philosophical Library, 1962.
- Dihkhuda, Ali Akbar. *The Lughatname*, University of Tehran Press, 1969.
- Huxley, Elespeth, "Challenge of Africa," *Exploring Africa and Asia*, Doubleday, 1971.
- "Industrialization Changes the Face of Bandar Abbas," *Iran Economic News*, vol. 4, no. 6, 1978.
- Junod, Henri A. *The Life of a South African Tribe*, vols. 1&2, University Books, Inc., 1962.
- Lincoln, Bruce. *Priests Warriors and Cattle: A Comparative Study of East African and Indo-European Religious Systems*, University of Chicago Dissertation.
- Sa'edi, Ghulam Hussein. *Ahl-i Hava*, University of Tehran Press, 1967.
- Sadid al-Saltana, Muhammad Ali. *Bandar Abbas and Khalij-i Fars*, Ibn-i Sina Publications, Tehran, 1964.
- Shamlu, Habib Allah. *Tarikh-i Iran az Mad ta Pahlavi*, Safi Ali Shah Publications, Tehran, 1969.
- Taqizadeh, S. H. *Old Iranian Calendars*, The Royal Asiatic Society (Prize Publications), vol. 16, London, 1938.
- Villiers, Alan. *Sons of Sindbad: The Great Tradition of Arab Seamanship in the Indian Ocean*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969.
- Westermarck, Edward Alexander. *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, vols. 1&2, University Books, Inc., New York, 1968.
- Zaehner, R. C. *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, Weidenfelt and Nicolson, London, 1961.