

Religious Musical Knowledge and Modes of Transmission among the Kurdish Ahl-e Haqq of Gurān¹

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Introduction

The great astronomer and social commentator Adam Frank says: “We are fundamentally storytellers Every society . . . has had a system of myths, a constellation of stories that provide a basic sense of meaning and context” (2018:8). So what is this constellation of stories for the Ahl-e Haqq (AH) people? How are these stories told, transmitted, embodied, and kept alive? What is the meaning and value of this perpetual transmission?

The Kurdish AH (also referred to as Yārsān/Yāresān)² have been a minority group for centuries. A collective biography and social memory that includes an intertwined compendium of

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² “The AH, literally ‘the People of the Truth,’ or *Yārsān/Yāresān/Yārestān*, with plausible translations as ‘the friends of Sultān,’ ‘the [divine] friend Sultān,’ or ‘the [divine] nation/territory of *Yāri* (comradeship, friendship, or service),’ is a distinct faith with a rich cultural heritage and formalized practices with the belief that God or the idea of the divine, following the initial state of perfect nothingness or oneness, and after the eruption of the pre-existent ‘pearl,’ manifests itself in a cyclic manner through a sevenfold cluster referred to as the *Haftan* or *Haft-tan* (the Seven) The eventual objective in the AH religion is the instatement of divine righteousness, which is attained through the many hardships and trials that the various entities in each cycle have to go through A variety of original and borrowed phenomena, entities, ideas, and terminology are employed to exclusively express and represent their worldview In the sacred texts, which is an important source for the study of the AH religion, the original and borrowed ideas are presented through astronomical bodies; real and mythological human characters and animals; human body parts; characters in Iranian mythology and history; local agricultural tools, games, food items, locations, and housing types; musical instruments, musical practices, sounds, and dance; numbers and the letters of the alphabet; colors; flowers, trees, and fruits; fragrances, herbs, and spices; elements from various religious practices, and others. Borrowed ideas from other sources are sometimes altered to one degree or another

beliefs, principles, and practices has been critical to their social, psychological, and physical survival and welfare as a community. Practices among the AH of Gurān are meant to celebrate, retell, study, educate, rehearse, perform, entertain—albeit with reverence—preserve, and sustain religious knowledge.³ The social memory and practices hold the community together in that members may declare the status of belonging to the community through a finite, comprehensible, and therefore inclusive and meaningful experience of their space of living, everyday social life, historical time, and the future. They make life meaningful for the AH and help the community survive the social pressures they have historically experienced. The individuals seem to share a primary common purpose, and that is to live a life of good deeds, so that they may be salvaged by the *Haftan* (the seven-fold cluster that represents the idea of the divine for the AH), and in particular by Dāwud (one of the *Haftan*).

Because the idea of the sacred is knitted into everyday life for the AH (see Hooshmandrad 2014), it is difficult to separate what might be considered religious knowledge and practices from the whole of AH life. Therefore I define religious knowledge for the AH as any idea, narrative, history, practice, canon of texts or musical repertoires, or stylized action, whether in daily activities and relationships or in sacred ritual settings, that may be transmitted orally or embodied.

Music plays an important role in transmitting and conserving religious knowledge and identity, and sustaining a way of life for the AH people of the Gurān region. Religious musical knowledge embraces the music, the texts, the rituals, the daily life of the AH, and grand ideas about the AH religion, identity, and community. The musical practice is in essence an embodiment of the whole narrative of who the AH people are. Through musical performance and the act of transmission the AH cultural space is kept alive.

In this article, aspects and modes of “orally embodied” transmission of religious musical and music-related knowledge in the Gurān tradition will be examined. I shall ask the following questions. What is being transmitted? How is religious musical knowledge transmitted, embodied, and sustained? Who/what are the repositories? What aids in the transmission of the musical repertoire? How might we comment on the relationship between music and text in its broadest sense in the AH tradition? What are the sanctioned variations and alterations in traditional transmission? Which changes and new modes of sustaining practices can we find? How are traditional teaching methods applied in new settings? Who is an expert now? What are the new forms of preservation? How are the teaching of *tanbur* (the sole musical instrument in the AH religious tradition) in formal music institutions and the staging of formal concerts affecting the practice? What is the impact of social media and contacts with the outside world? Finally, embodiment of grand ideas such as experiencing love and respect for the religion and AH’s existence and prosperity through the transmission of practices will be cited.

By “religious/sacred music” in this article, I refer to a musical practice that is believed to

(losing their original function and meaning) in order to help best express AH’s teachings. The objective in these cases is to express their belief system in multiple ways through the use of those concepts and entities” (Hooshmandrad 2014:48-49).

³ For a list of interlinked tangible and intangible elements, expressions, and experiences that define the AH community and mark the connection of daily life and the sacred, see Hooshmandrad 2014:57-58. For a discussion of how a *liminal* state is maintained through representations of the ideas of preservation and authenticity, see 59-62.

have been revealed by “divine” entities. This is in contrast to the perceived status of sacred music in Western music history, which is generally defined as a type of music made for and performed in the church. Aside from the goals of understanding, cherishing, and preserving the cultural heritage of a group of human beings, this paper may contribute to the knowledge of the subject in comparative religious studies. My work is based on nineteen years of field research with the AH of the Gurān region.

“[O]rality is often considered a means of accessing collective memory or innate human truth. Whether orality manifests itself through an epic, a folktale, a lyric, a lament, a dirge, or a charm, the medium is innately connected with cultural knowledge” (MacNeil 2007:3). The concept of orality as used in this article comprises the people, the items, and the methods involved in the transmission process. The goal of transmission is to express and sustain the distinctiveness of the community and the experience of a “sense of place.” In the Kurdish of the Gurān region, the phrase *sina wa sina* (lit. “chest to chest”) is used for the oral transmission of knowledge. Even though the Kurdish word *sina* literally means chest, the word may also refer to the heart (as in “the core and soul of a person”) as well as memory and mind. The phrase *sina wa sina* in my opinion describes the transmission method of the AH more accurately than the word “oral” unless we provide a fuller definition of “oral” based on AH practices. Here we may define “orality” as a concept comprising modes of transmission that lie far beyond merely spoken and sounded utterance. I define the term “oral” as including communication through the spoken word and other sounded utterances, as well as through the performance and learning of the body in the broadest sense of the phrase; as including individuals, community, objects, and social memory; as the result of the integration of the aural and the textual; and, finally, as including involvement in a multisensory, (older or more advanced) technologically-oriented cyber-world (MacNeil 2007:2).



Fig. 1. Ostād Tāher Yārwaysi, one of the most well known and highly respected *kalām-khwāns* and *daftar-khwāns* of the Gurān region (photo by Partow Hooshmandrad).

Traditional Aspects and Modes of Transmission of Musical Practice

“The . . . social body is the starting point of any musical activity” (Deschênes and Eguchi 2018:63). As a shared means of connection and communication, collective religious socio-musical knowledge in the AH tradition is a complex, multidimensional web of items, a collage of musical and extra-musical elements, ideas, and practices that are orally embodied. It is knowledge that the body learns, assimilates, and personalizes, and then performs without thinking (70).

There are different roles and levels of expertise for the embodiment and transmission of musical knowledge in the AH community, but all are somehow involved in this embodiment and transmission process. Communal adoration for the music is accessible to all through being surrounded by the representations of practices. On a micro level that is organically connected with the macro, the musical repertoire is represented by units called *nazm*. The *nazms* of the AH are structured musical entities that encapsulate ideas about the vocal and instrumental melodies, prescriptions for fitting the texts into the vocal renditions, rhythms, and clapping patterns, the abstract and concrete narratives associated with each *nazm*, the probable order of performance, the types of music that are performed in different contexts, settings, seating arrangements, etiquette for performance, and rules of interaction, the sanctity of the *tanbur*, religious beliefs, rituals, and devotional goals of music-making.

What is Being Transmitted?

In nineteen years of working with the Gurān AH community, I have gone through the process of “cultural proficiency” so as to be able to interact, understand, and appreciate life among the AH as intuitively as possible. This was made possible because of the generosity and support of the AH community. I rely on this acquired understanding of AH life to list the following as important segments of collective socio-cultural-musical knowledge that is perpetually transmitted, in and through musical practice, on different levels.⁴ Transmission and embodiment occur in a fluid manner. Not all aspects are perfectly or wholly embodied by everyone at all times. The order in the following passage is not necessarily hierarchical in nature. It is meant to provide a non-linear cluster and collection of important items:

- Believing in and respecting the worldview of the AH religion. The AH history. The difference between the Gurān region’s practices and others. AH’s relationship with the outside world. What to love and feel ecstatic for. Reverence towards the *Pir* (Elder of the community).
- Music as expression of religious belief. The connection of musical performance and *jam* (the ritual of blessing of food). The importance of learning, knowing, and participating in the musical

⁴ For a detailed discussion of various aspects of the AH musical practice, see Hooshmandrad 2019:15-19. For a discussion of the motivations for transmission and preservation efforts, see Hooshmandrad 2014.

practice directly or indirectly in order to feel a sense of solidarity with the *kalām-khwāns*⁵ (experts in singing the *nazms* with the sacred poems of the AH) and/or the community. Knowing the *nazms* of the repertoire. Knowing the titles of *nazms* (even forgotten *nazms*).

— Learning the *daftar*s (books of the AH sacred poems) by heart and understanding the meaning of the *daftar*s. Knowing the spiritual power and meaning of the *daftar*s and the *nazms*. Primary categorization of the *nazms* into group *haqiqi* (true/sacred) *nazms*, solo *haqiqi nazms*, and solo *majlesi/majāzi/bāstāni* (chamber/not “true,” not sacred/ancient) *nazms*. The idea of relative tuning on the *tanbur* (“movable *do*” in Western music terminology).

— Knowing the two main tunings on the *tanbur* (top single string tuned a fourth below the first double strings, referred to as the “seven” tuning because it corresponds to the seventh fret on the neck; or a fifth below the first double strings, referred to as the “five” tuning because it corresponds to the fifth fret on the neck). The sanctity and symbolic presence of the *tanbur* as the manifestation of one of the *Haftan*. How and when to kiss/greet the *tanbur* and the meaning of this gesture. Where to put the *tanbur* in places of residence. Washing hands before playing the *tanbur*. Giving the *tanbur* to a person of high spiritual status first and then to one who is the most expert *tanbur* player in a gathering. The style of holding the *tanbur*.

— Knowing the instrumental renditions. Knowing the vocal renditions (with consideration of the ways the verses of the *daftar* and syllables of the text fit into the melody of the vocal rendition). Knowing the correct melodic phrasing. Knowing the difference between solo and group sections/cycles of the group *nazms*. Knowing the permanent texts attached to the group *nazms*.

— Awareness that the instrumental rendition is meaningless without performance or imagining/remembering the vocal. Knowing the way these vocal and instrumental renditions are tied together, and how the performance and transmission of one trigger the recollection of the other. Playing the *tanbur* with appropriate volume during singing (or not playing at all during singing, while extending the right hand to signify that the texts should only be sung).

— Knowing the general rhythmic structure. Knowing the clapping (*chap*) patterns for pertinent *nazms*. Knowing that the succession of *nazms* in performance is rhythmic—from slower to faster *nazms*—not modal, even though *kalām-khwāns* are aware of modal connections (for example “Shāh Khwashini” and one of the “Hay Giyān” *nazms* are based on the same pitch selection, and this is often expressed in casual conversations). Knowing the sanctioned variations. Not improvising. Knowing the meanings and narratives connected with each *nazm*, contextualizing the *nazm* historically or cosmologically.

— Awareness of local proverbs teaching about *tanbur* performance culture. Systems of checks and balances (and evaluation of who is “better” or truer to the communally embodied/perceived/imagined original).

— Knowledge about tying knots of frets and changing strings of the *tanbur*. Knowledge of *tanbur* construction (among *tanbur* makers and musicians). Forms of interaction and stylized actions. Knowledge of the etiquette and seating arrangements for *kalām* sessions,⁶ walking processions,

⁵ Literally “singers of *kalām*.” A *kalām* session refers to a session that includes the chanting of selections from the sacred portion of the musical repertoire with the AH sacred poems (*daftar*). *Kalām* may also refer to the body of the sacred poems of the AH.

⁶ A session of group chanting where participants are seated in one or two circles.

formal social observances such as mourning ceremonies, and casual gatherings. Knowing the difference between a *kalām-khwān* (leader of the *kalām* session) and *kalām-wa-sinay* (“receivers of the *kalām*”). Knowledge about the correct way to be a lead *kalām-khwān* and how to be part of the group singers as *kalām-wa-sinayl*.

— Importance of the moral character of a *tanbur* player and *kalām-khwān*. Knowing the life stories of *tanbur* players and *kalām-khwāns* (as a way of keeping these stories alive). The option of several people singing together as *kalām* leaders (consulting among themselves about the lines of poetry and the succession of *nazms* as they perform).

— The difference between a *kalām* session without and with a *niyāz jam* ritual (which would require the use of head cover and belt as symbols of humility, spiritual maturity, and readiness to be of service; and singing the texts connected with *niyāz*).

— The structure of walking processions in comparison to seated *kalām* sessions (seating arrangements in one or two circles in comparison to prescribed patterns of movement in walking processions).

— Awareness of the option of several people taking turns in singing the solo *nazms* in casual settings (each following their chosen verse). Knowledge of available written and audiovisually recorded information (more recent).



Fig. 2. Kākā-Berār Ostād’s *tanbur* class in the early 2000s after a *niyāz jam* session. He is one of the most well known and highly respected *tanbur* teachers, *kalām-khwāns*, and *daftar-khwāns* of the region (photo by Partow Hooshmandrad).

How Is Religious Musical Knowledge Transmitted, Embodied, and Sustained? Who/What Are the Repositories?

Without a doubt there is an intention and a serious determination for transmitting and preserving socio-musical knowledge in the AH community. Traditional methods and processes are very much alive. In previous writings on the AH, I have demonstrated that the ideas of preservation and debates about authenticity lead to decisions about what should be transmitted (Hooshmandrad 2014:61). Here I shall further discuss *how* religious musical knowledge is transmitted, embodied, and sustained.

As noted previously, I use the term “embodied orality” following Deschênes and Eguchi’s (2018) designation to refer to the complex web of tangible or intangible items, processes, experiences, and ideas that help transmit religious musical knowledge in the AH community. This is beyond mimetic transmission of isolated elements. I use “embodied orality” because knowledge among the AH is transmitted in more ways than just verbalization and abstraction of knowledge. As Staal appositely states in his discussion of the Vedas, “the meaning of the mantra is not the meaning of those words,” and “[r]itual is a physical activity of the body but not only of the mouth and ears” (2008:193).

The tangible and figurative venues for transmission and the sustaining of musical knowledge exist within a range of entities, concepts, and scenarios. These include the following:

- Expert *kalām-khwāns* and *tanbur* players. Members of the community as participants with varied levels of knowledge and proficiency.
- Social and physical spaces where learning occur through osmosis by being surrounded with aspects of the music in daily life. Seated *kalām* sessions. Walking processions. Lifecycle performances such as mourning ceremonies. Casual performances.
- *Tanbur* classes led by experts (ranging from formal to more casual). Focused or casual conversations about the practices.
- Written instructions and analyses in prose or verse form. Written narratives based on oral discussions. Audio and video recordings of interviews with experts, and conventional as well as pedagogical performances. Lists and categories of *nazms* based on oral knowledge. Stories and conversations about *kalām-khwāns* and comparisons.
- Historical and present spaces where the competency of various experts is assessed.

Of course, musical and textual experts and keepers of the tradition (*kalām-khwāns* and *daftar-khwāns*) are the most important repositories of socio-musical knowledge. One receives the designation *kalām-khwān* or *daftar-khwān* only if she/he knows most or all of the *nazms* and many verses of the sacred poems by heart. Additionally, learning and embodiment on an expert level is achieved when one is not only subliminally aware of all the melodic, rhythmic, textual, and contextual aspects of the presentation, but when one performs “spontaneously even under stressful situations” (Deschênes and Eguchi 2018:68). These experts must also have high moral characters since their presence has tremendous power over the cultural education of community. With a well defined past and a cautious stance towards changes in the future, musical and textual experts continue to exchange ideas and refine their knowledge while they train their children and

keep the tradition alive. These children internalize and make the transmitted knowledge their own through “osmosis” and active participation in ritual and casual musical assemblies. Their progress is constantly assessed before they receive the status of an expert as an adult. *Kalām-khwāns* and *daftar-khwāns* also transmit musical knowledge to other members of the community indirectly through their performances or directly through individual and group instruction.

For several decades, recordings have been used as a tool for transmission. These attempts began with cassette-tape recordings of a number *kalām-khwāns* and *tanbur* players, including Sayyed Wali Hosseini, Khālu/Lālu Badr (Bayar) Khān Zardayi, Kāki Allāh-Morād Hamidiniyā, Kāki Wali Mirzāyi, Darwish Ali Gawra Jubi (Juyi), Sayyed Khayāl and Sayyed Nāsser Yādegāri, Darwish Ali-Mir and Darwish Jahāngir Darwishi, Mirzā Said-Ali Kafāshiyān, and many others. Most noteworthy of these recordings in terms of preservation efforts are those of Sayyed Wali Hosseini, which were intentionally created for teaching and transmission purposes. Other recordings were made to preserve the heritage of performance practice. The recordings mentioned were not produced methodically and were partially based on what the *kalām-khwāns* remembered at the time. They were also mostly recorded when these *kalām-khwāns* were older. This might have influenced melodic and textual memory and technique. Nevertheless, we are fortunate to have these archival cassette recordings, because they allow us to compare the playing and singing styles of different *kalām-khwāns* in terms of quality, presence, length of performance for each *nazm*, use of particular verses for different *nazms*, and explanations and narratives attached to the *nazms*. Some of these recordings were made at the request of ā Sayyed Nasr al-Din Haydari, the current *Pir* of the Gurān region, and some were done by *tanbur* enthusiasts of the region who are now respected *kalām-khwāns* themselves (such as Kākā-Berār Ostād, one of the greatest current bearers of the AH musical repertoire).

Another example of recordings and written resources rooted in the oral tradition is the author’s recording and musical transcription of the repertoire of the *nazms* in the early 2000s (Hooshmandrad 2004). These transcriptions, created in part for preservation and transmission purposes, were recently utilized in the production of a video album of the entire *nazm* repertoire (Ostād and Hooshmandrad 2019). During the production process (2016-18), my teacher Kākā-Berār Ostād and I were able to have fruitful discussions about minute variations in the performance of some of the *nazms* in comparison to earlier recordings from 2000. One such discussion was about a certain *nazm* which was performed with a different rhythmic structure in 2016 and in 2000. We arrived at this conclusion after we examined the earlier recordings and transcriptions. This led to a review of our earlier recordings and transcriptions, recordings of old masters, and consultations with living masters of the region for confirmation and a faithful transmission of the *nazm*.

Transmission is not always directly and readily apparent. In fact, in the AH community transmission usually occurs in an encapsulated form. The encapsulated transmissions and experiences include elements that are meaningful in a multidimensional collective. For example, the mere intention to stage a *kalām* session, or the mere presence of items such as the *tanbur*, directly or indirectly evoke and induce a chain of thoughts, memories, histories, emotions, beliefs, agreements, and “truths,” which define the experience of a *kalām* session with the eventual performance goal of purification and the hope for manifestation of Soltān (the absolute idea of the divine in AH religion).



Fig. 3. Ostād Tāher Yārwaysi (right) and Sayyed Abbās Dāmanafshān (left), two of the most well known and highly respected *kalām-khwāns* and *daftar-khwāns* of the region (photo by Partow Hooshmandrad).



Fig. 4. A *niyāz jam* performed by Sayyed Abbās Dāmanafshān (left) and Sayyed Iraj Eftekhāri (right) (photo by Partow Hooshmandrad).

Factors in the Transmission of Musical Repertoire

Several factors play a role in the transmission of musical repertoire. First, an absolute love and affection for the AH religion, and the musical repertoire and the *tanbur* as sacred entities, is evident in everyday interactions. This is reinforced by ample presence of verses and ideas about the sanctity and importance of sound and music for the AH religion in the *daftars*. It is true that only a limited number of individuals were/are experts, that it is not a religious obligation for everyone to be an expert, and that the musical practice is comprehended and appreciated on various levels. Nevertheless, everyone is expected to participate in valuing the music and the texts, for example through having *tanburs* and *daftars* as religious icons in their homes, and through listening to the music and the recitation of the texts. Second, the use of sacred texts in the vocal rendition of the *nazms* adds to the veneration of the musical practice and therefore safeguarding it. Third, it is a finite repertoire with well defined and recognized variations. The utter joy and surprise expressed in a *kalām* session observed by the author in 2001, when a single new pitch was used in the singing of the group *nazm* “Sultān-e Dina,” is an indication that spontaneous changes are clearly noticed, although they are very rare. Fourth, the structure and nature of the AH music, for example, the existence of solo and group cycles in the group *nazms*, necessitates the coming together of community members, which sustains transmission. The effect of technology on the transmission process will be discussed later in this contribution.

Text and Music

Even though the majority of the texts used by the AH have been written down, hand-copied, and printed, they have been orally narrated and transmitted. They are mostly in a unique form of Hawrāmi Kurdish with some exceptions that are in Persian, Sorāni Kurdish, and Turkish. The texts that are used in the performance of the *nazms* and the direct or indirect transmission of information on the *nazms* include the following categories (Hooshmandrad 2014:53):

- Books of the sacred poems of Gurān normally having a combination of twenty-syllable and fifteen-syllable lines for the verses, with several exceptions that have sixteen-syllable lines—as in the case of *Daftar-e Il Baygi Jāf*—and varied syllabic structures as in the case of *Daftar-e Perdiwari* (all of which are believed to be of divine origin).
- Permanent texts of group *nazms* with a variety of syllabic structures used in a similar manner as a refrain (believed to be of divine origin):
 - Selected collections of verses of the *daftars* by *kalām-khwāns*;
 - Non-sacred Kurdish poems in Hawrāmi that may be used in the vocal rendition of non-sacred solo *nazms*;
 - Fixed syllables, words, and phrases used in between segments of the vocal rendition of solo *nazms*;
 - Spoken prayers/invocations used in the rituals;
 - Non-sacred instructive texts in prose or verse form.

- Audio recordings of instructive discussions with regional experts (these may be regarded as a sort of “oral” commentary, to illuminate the meaning of various aspects of the AH religion).
- Oral narratives connected with the *nazms* (these may also be regarded as a sort of “oral” text).

Even though performances of the *nazms* occur on the two levels of instrumental and vocal, they are like the warp and woof of fabric and inseparable. One is either accompanied by the other or at least signals the other rendition. Does the instrumental dominate or the vocal? There is “a balance between the two modes allowing for moments of each. . . .” (Marcus and Reynolds 1994-95:5), since the texts used in singing, the melodies of the vocal and instrumental renditions in the *haqiqi nazms*, and the *tanbur* are all sacred and equally revered.

Vocal renditions of the *nazms* are not only transmitted in terms of their melody, but also in terms of how the text is matched with the melody. The endorsed versions of the vocal rendition of the *nazms* have fixed or semi-fixed text-melody charting that indicates what syllable is to be sung with what pitch and for how many counts. This is especially true of the group *nazms*. In this way, the use of text in the vocal rendition of a *nazm* helps with remembering and transmitting the melody. My view is that the somewhat elastic but at the same time clearly prescribed text-melody relationship in the Gurān repertoire acts as a type of rhythmic “notation,” in that the design and matching of the syllables of text to the pitches of the melody will help the performer recall the rhythmic organization of musical phrases. In turn, musical performance is a venue for transmitting and memorizing the texts through the prescribed use of the texts in the vocal rendition of the *nazms*. Also, the mere singing of the sacred poems in the vocal rendition of the *nazms* helps with the transmission and preservation of the *daftars* and thus the teachings and stories of the AH religion. This is not surprising, as other studies have also found that “music plays an important role in oral transmission of poetry” (Deschênes and Eguchi 2018:58). The preservation of the texts through music has an added devotional benefit. The sacred poems are written in a highly coded manner and are very difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, the mere uttering of the poems is thought to bring blessings to the individual or the group involved, much like the chanting⁷ of the Indian Vedas where the Vedic Sanskrit texts might not be immediately comprehensible to all but the mere chanting of them is thought to bring blessings to performers.

Transmission of musical knowledge and the texts are related in a number of other ways also. The *daftars* provide and transmit much musical information. There are many examples in the *daftars* pointing to the importance of sound and music and teachings about the sanctity of the *tanbur* and the musical practice. There are references to the sound of the *tanbur* being connected with one of the manifestations of Sultān (Anonymous n.d.:31) and direct depictions of a *kalām* session in the “divine realm” (Sorāni n.d.:28-29).

Selected collections of texts for musical performance are another example of connections between the text and the transmission of musical knowledge. One such example is the unpublished collection of selected verses from a number of *daftars* by Kāki Aziz Panāhi, which is based on decades of *kalām* sessions and used regularly by the *kalām-khwāns* of Gahwārah and beyond.

⁷ “Chant” in this article generically stands for the singing of devotional texts.

Variations and Alterations in Traditional Transmission

In his contemplation on the idea of community, Burt Feintuch reminds us that “integrity of social relations does not rule out difference” (2001:51). Traditional methods and processes of transmission occur in an assortment of modes and may only be discussed within a spectrum of many possibilities. Such is the case with the AH’s transmission of musical knowledge. It is important to note that traditional methods of transmission are not rigid and allow for flexibility within the boundaries designated through consensus. Melodic and rhythmic variations and some level of elasticity in the vocal and instrumental renditions of the *nazms* are important components of the traditional performance practice. At the same time, there are limits to the extent of variation out of fear of losing the essence of the *nazms*. No improvisation is allowed. Groups of *kalām-khwāns* come to agreement about fixity and elasticity in the performance of *nazms*. This knowledge is orally transmitted. Exceptions to the limits are tolerated in some cases. One such tolerated deviation is the case of Latif Manhuyi, who sometimes combines the Gurān *nazms* with other Kurdish musics and Persian *dastgāh* music, at times even changing the scalar structure of *nazms* (as in Manhuyi’s performance of the *nazm* “Tana-Miri” in archival recordings). His mixing of the traditional repertoire and surrounding musical practices and experimentation with improvisation is generally overlooked, perhaps because the community enjoys his musical presence, and all know that this is an exception to the rules. He is not believed to have malicious intentions in his approach. At the end, however, only the *Pirs* are allowed to make a substantial change within traditional practices that would be recognized by the community. Two such cases include the addition of the *nazms* “Sar-Tarz” and “Duwāla” composed consecutively by ā Sayyed Berāka Haydari and ā Sayyed Rostam Haydari, two of the most revered *Pirs* of the Gurān region.

As mentioned above, melodic and rhythmic variations and some level of elasticity in the vocal and instrumental renditions of the *nazms* are important components of performance practice. Intended or unintended variations may be observed within an assortment of pretexts and a complex spectrum. These factors and elements include variability in narration of the repertoire by different experts/teachers and lineages (and even the same teacher in different time periods); proficiency of the bearers and their level of expertise; recordings of various *kalām-khwāns* with different performance styles; the order of performance of the *nazms*; habitually more frequent performance of some *nazms* than others; causing some *nazms* to be forgotten; elasticity and variations in melody and rhythm; choice of verses for singing; acceptance of minute melodic and rhythmic variety as long as the text is sung correctly; ornamentation in vocal and instrumental renditions, whether or not there is a vocal *wach* (*wach* literally means “child” and refers to the secondary part in the melody of a *nazm*; this is different from the concept of *gusheh* in Iranian *dastgāh* music) for a *nazm* (such as the case of Sayyed Nāsser Yādegāri, who would sing a *wach* for the solo *nazm* “Gharibi”); talent to repeat and remember detailed performances as heard before; memory erosion; the existence of an assortment of dialects in the Gurān, Qalkhāni, and Sanjābi regions, leading to different pronunciations of the texts; pupil population; and transmission spaces including ritual, pedagogical, social, and casual performances.

A comparison between the author’s field recordings of the *nazms* performed by Kākā-Berār Ostād in the year 2000 and the 2019 production of a formal album for public distribution titled *Nazms of Gurān: A Pedagogical Presentation* (Ostād and Hooshmandrad 2019, mentioned

previously in this paper), demonstrates slight patterns of change in the transmission of the *nazms*. For example, several *nazms* have been removed and several others added to Ostād's repertoire in the 2019 album. The added *nazms* included "Yār Dāwud Haqq, Version 2," "Chelāna Mastan," and "Khwājā-y Gholāmān Giyān." The removed *nazms* included "Yārān Wa Bāten" and "Sāqi Nāma." Moreover, some of the *nazms* that were performed slightly differently in the 2019 video recording included minute changes in text-melody relationship, for example in the group *nazm* "Hu Hu Yār, Version 2." According to Ostād, he had made these revisions after a thorough review of the recordings of past masters of the region and consultation with the elders of the community in order to preserve the most consistently documented oral and recorded form of the *nazms* (for comparative purposes, see Hooshmandrad 2004 and 2019).

Another way to think about variety in AH music is that there are two main approaches towards the repertoire of *nazms* when considering traditional transmission modes: one for teaching purposes and possibly for scholarly analysis, and the other informed by performance practice in ritual and casual settings, where teaching is not a direct concern. In teaching, each *kalām-khwān* has their own "correct" variant of listing and clustering of the *nazms*, even though the three categories (1) group *haqiqi nazms*, (2) solo *haqiqi nazms*, and (3) solo *majlesi/majāzi/bāstāni nazms*, are consistent among all *kalām-khwāns*. For example, in the *Nazms of Gurān: A Pedagogical Presentation* video album, the listing of group *nazms* is based on Kākā-Berār Ostād's pedagogical method, which focuses partially on the progression of *nazms* from the "easiest" to the more "difficult" *nazms*, on the basis of years of training a large number of *tanbur* players. Other *kalām-khwāns*, such as Ostād Tāher Yārwaysi or Sayyed Taymour Mehrābi, cluster the *nazms* slightly differently in teaching. To point to a variant listing of the *nazms*, the author has grouped and classified the *nazms* considering a variety of factors including textual and musical analysis, as well as performance practice (Hooshmandrad 2004). Teaching settings in newly developed music academies, and how these new venues have caused transformations in the listing of *nazms*, will be discussed in the section titled "Changes and Sustaining Practices" later in this article. (It is important to note though that the boundaries between "traditional" and "changed" methods and newly arrived and invented points in the process of transformation are not always clear.) In contrast, the succession of *nazms* in actual performance is relatively fixed among most *kalām-khwāns* with some possible variations. Certain patterns for grouping the *nazms* have been consistently transmitted to the present.

As mentioned previously, different *kalām-khwāns* have created different sequences in the listing of the *nazms*. They also sometimes disagree on the most correct version of a *nazm*. However, there is constant discussion about whose version is the most "correct/authentic" one, and revisiting old recordings and manuscripts and adjusting to new findings is absolutely part of the "traditional transmission" process. This is part of a serious system of checks and balances to transmit the material as carefully as possible. The famous grading sessions organized and led by ā Sayyed Shams al-Din Haydari (one of the previous *Pirs* of the Gurān region), where he would test and evaluate the knowledge of the *kalām-khwāns* and *tanbur* players on the musical repertoire, are a good example of these checks and balances (see Hooshmandrad 2014:60). On the other extreme of these endorsed limits and constraints there is the general idea that as long as the texts of the *daftar* are uttered correctly, the *nazm* is correct. However, more than anything these types of statements signify the importance and weight of the *daftar*s, whilst at the same

time they are meant to include everyone in devotional practices. In fact, the author's observation in the last nineteen years has been that the melodies are astonishingly kept intact and performances are extremely consistent.

Finally, in the performance of the *nazms* with regular rhythm (regular units or repeated cycles of beats), it does not always matter if the exact regular units of beats are performed equally every time, although they are perceived as such in the minds of *kalām-khwāns*. All that needs to happen in performance is that the performers should revert to the regular cycles of beats by adjusting the claps.

Changes and Sustaining Practices

New methods and modes in the transmission of musical knowledge are undeniably evident in a close examination and observation of the last two decades of the AH communities. However, the "traditional" transmission processes discussed above are also very much alive or at least deeply woven into new methods. These parallel activities and transmission methods have helped keep the traditional performance practice alive. Changes in the way the tradition is handed down do not always lead to changes in the performance practice. They are seen as new tools to sustain traditional performances. Thus, while changes in venues and modes of transmission may be observed, they seem to be deeply attached to and ingrained in the old practices. If I may, the old practices and methods of transmission may be imagined as a sea with ever-existing ships on it, and the new methods and practices are only newly added boats floating on the same sea.

That said, traditional teaching in new settings, the movement and migration of AH individuals to different parts of the country, teaching *tanbur* music in formal music academies, performance of *tanbur* at national and international concerts and festivals, and the use of social media have led to some changes. On one hand, these changes have certainly created new opportunities for experiencing *tanbur* music by a larger population of enthusiasts. The consequence of this popular spread however (usually sprouting from positive intentions) has been at times an uneven transmission, newly generated compositions and techniques, and a not always effective blending with other music cultures, admittedly mostly due to a sincere and healthy desire for collaborative endeavors, social interaction, and social recognition through staged concerts.

Traditional Teaching Methods in New Settings

The more people have moved away from the region for social and economic opportunities and chosen homes in new places, where they no longer live in the fixed space of a village or town within the Gurān, Qalkhāni, and Sanjābi districts, the more the tradition of learning by naturally being exposed to the musical practice is gone. Therefore, new formal classes have developed, which are led by a number of *kalām-khwāns* and their traditionally trained children in- and outside of the region, with the intention of safeguarding musical

knowledge. Interestingly, some individuals in the new generation of teachers from *kalām-khwān* families also pursue a formal education in music (one such case is Rezā Gholāmi). By contrast, traditional *kalām-khwāns* and teachers were (and some still are) attached to traditional ways of life such as farming and herding or crafts, with some owning small businesses and some involved in the education sector.

In these newly formed classes AH and sometimes non-AH *tanbur* enthusiasts participate. The focus on vocal and instrumental renditions of the *nazms* stays intact. The teaching of AH sacred poems also remains extremely important, although some teachers might not see fit to share the sacred poems with non-initiates. The only differences between traditional and new contexts are that the geographical setting might be outside the region, new methods of transmission, such as audio and video recordings, have been added to the teaching process, and most classes do not create an opportunity for combining the performance of music with the *jam*, the ritual of blessing the food, which is at the core of AH religious practices.

While all efforts are made by these respected *kalām-khwāns* to transmit the tradition as they have received it (even though some level of variation in the performance of the *nazms* has existed even in conventional contexts), the nature of these newly formed classes that are geographically removed from the traditional space of transmission has led to some changes. In these formal classes prescriptive standards have been created for groups of students for the sake of consistency and group rehearsals. Additionally, the choice of *daftars* for singing is more limited in comparison to the past due to the presence of mixed groups of students. Finally, the idea of methodical practice is rather new and in fact a positive result of these new classes.

In order to avoid the loss of subtle variations that are part of the traditional mode of performance of the repertoire, in his *tanbur* classes, Kākā-Berār Ostād has expertly and perceptively created two versions for each *nazm* that he designates as the “basic” and the “advanced” levels. Ostād’s advanced rendition includes the sanctioned variations and much more ornamentation.

Traditional ways of transmission still persist on the group and individual level in the region. Sayyed Abbās Dāmanafshān and his family are an excellent example of sustaining the practices in the traditional manner and location. He has maintained a custom of gathering his grandchildren to practice the solo *nazms* and the refrains of the group *nazms*, and the clapping patterns for clapped *nazms*. Sayyed Abbās’s eldest son is also a great *tanbur* player and *kālām-khwān*, who knows many verses of the *daftar* with the traditional interpretations and always looks for new ways to keep the tradition alive through teaching and performing.



Fig. 5. Kākā-Berār Ostād's classes outside of the region in recent years (photo courtesy of Kākā-Berār Ostād).

Who is an Expert Now?

In the past *kalām-khwāns* would have been (and still are in traditional settings) the most valued and recognized bearers of the tradition. They would have gone through years of assessment by older experts and the elders of the community, and they knew many verses of the *daftar* by heart. The famous sessions of ā Sayyed Shams al-Din Haydari where all *kalām-khwāns* would gather to be tested on their knowledge of the musical repertoire have already been mentioned. Nowadays, even though experts in traditional settings still strive for the old standards and discuss the qualifications of various musicians, the old system of checks and balances is being transformed.

Although women have always been deeply involved in all devotional practices and in the transmission of religious knowledge, in the past only a few of them were methodically trained in reciting the *daftars* or the *nazms* and considered “experts.” These women from past generations, who were mostly considered experts in the *daftars*, included Sayyed Homā Haydari, Minā Khānom, Sayyed Nosrat Dāneshwar, and others. Currently, compared to previous generations, there is a very large number of women who seriously study the *daftars* and the *nazms*. Pegāh Salimi is one example, who is the shining star in the new generation of female *tanbur* players.

New Preservation Efforts

The variety of new AH efforts for preservation are connected with and imbedded in

conservation modes of the past. They “[recapture] a past most of the participants know only through stories” (Feintuch 2001:154) and attempt to reimagine and construct the idea of the AH community by whatever accessible means possible.

Some archival recordings of the past closely correspond to the performance practice of the *nazms* where multiple cycles of a *nazm* are performed with the use of at least one, and sometimes several verses of the *daftar*. Such is the case in the performance of the *nazm* “Sar-Tarz” by Sayyed Farhād Yādegāri. However, in most archival recordings of the *nazms* of Gurān, the *kalām-khwān* has performed the *nazms* in a shorter manner than usual so as to transmit the essence of many *nazms* in the brief time available for a recording session on cassette tapes. Even though this compressed mode of transmission has certainly influenced teaching methods where teachers offer shorter performances of the *nazms* as models, it has nonetheless helped with ideas about playing and singing styles, phrasing, rhythm, use of text, narratives attached to *nazms*, and most importantly, with the way each *kalām-khwān* has abstracted the idea of a *nazm* in his mind. I argue that there is a similarity between these short recordings and serious attempts at notating the *nazms* (based on orally transmitted information). It is true that transcription and use of notation by nature freeze a conceptual understanding of a *nazm* and narrow the range of possible variations, thus altering the experience of the oral tradition. However, if the goal of transcription is clear as to its use for reference purposes, then it may be considered a new but useful tool for those who no longer have the privilege of growing up in the AH community. This is especially true if the skeletal notation is accompanied by oral demonstrations of a live teacher.⁸

Currently, formally published audio and video recordings and informal filming of performances on phones have become commonplace for AH music enthusiasts. The previously mentioned 2019 video album *Nazms of Gurān: A Pedagogical Presentation* is an example of these new endeavors. The authors spent months deliberating about the order of *nazms*, selection of verses, the number of times each instrumental and vocal cycle should be performed for a pedagogical presentation, how to compensate for the fact that these performances are not presented in a “real” performance space and group singers are not present to “receive” the *kalām* for group *nazms*, and many other particulars, before deciding on a unified and structured performance that might be useful for the AH community and other enthusiasts alike. Kākā-Berār Ostād also reviewed practically all archival recordings and consulted older experts and elders of the community due to a sense of responsibility for performing and preserving the most “authentic” version of the repertoire.

A surge of publications on AH music culture is also emerging in the form of articles, books, websites attempting to upload all available material from the past and present, and various channels of social media such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. All these new “transmission” modes are rooted in orally transmitted and embodied knowledge.

Teaching of *Tanbur* in Formal Music Institutions and Staged Concerts

Another interesting change is the teaching of *tanbur* in music schools and institutions

⁸ Please see the author’s transcription of the *nazm* repertoire in Hooshmandrad 2004.

where other types of music, such as the Iranian *dastgāh*, are taught. Here we have among the young generation of *tanbur* players (and teachers) individuals who are part of the AH community, but who might not be living in the traditional geographical spaces where they would be regularly exposed to the performance of rituals. They also might not be active participants in AH *kalām* sessions. These individuals identify as musicians and performers while taking pride in their AH identity and heritage. As a result of their work at these institutions they are not only exposed to musical genres such as Iranian *dastgāh* music, but they also welcome dialogue and collaborative efforts with non-AH *tanbur* musicians. Another change that must be noted as a result of this new transcultural space of transmission is that the focus on instrumental music is increasingly favored in comparison to the practice of combining vocal and instrumental renditions. The emphasis on instrumental music at these formal institutions also means the study of AH sacred texts is not included, or only partially included, in the training, unless the teacher is keen to inform and train her/his students on these texts. A notable and positive change that has resulted from formal classes at music academies is that there are a number of female *tanbur* players who act as teachers, whereas in traditional settings the active presence of female teachers would not often have been seen (even though women have always been serious and essential participants in the transmission of musical knowledge in the Gurān region). Finally, in traditional settings normally no exchange of money would take place for teaching. In contrast, the nature of these new formal classes at music academies necessitates regular tuition fees.⁹

A desire for variety, detachment from the purely devotional nature of the AH music, exposure to and interaction with other music cultures at these music academies, more emphasis on instrumental music, and new spaces of performance such as concerts and festivals, have caused additional changes for some. For example, in comparison to traditional principles, improvisation and compositions are becoming more customary among new *tanbur* performers, who are mostly learning a variable version of the repertoire with a focus on the instrumental, and detached from the vocal rendition of the *nazms*, texts, and ritual/religious associations. Therefore the finite and fixed nature of the AH repertoire in terms of strict limitations on variation of the melodies and rhythms of the *nazms* is changing for these populations. Some *nazms* have even been reconstructed by some in the new generation of *tanbur* players to appeal to a larger audience. Moreover, other instruments besides the *tanbur* have been added in ensemble performances that mix AH music with other musics. These manifestations are more evident in public performances and commercial recordings. Finally, concerts and festivals have created a new standard for “preparing” for performances, whereas in ritual settings, performances occur spontaneously, without prior practice and many times for purely ritual purposes.

Social Media and Contact with the Outside World

The popularity of multiple platforms of social media as well as contacts and collaborations with the outside world have created new opportunities for learning and the exchange of ideas. These platforms are utilized for the preservation and transmission of

⁹ For reflections on *tanbur* construction and economical considerations see Hooshmandrad 2015a.

traditional musical knowledge. Nowadays the younger generation of *tanbur* players are using social media to discuss, share, and critique different performances and performance styles, as they examine extra-musical aspects such as history of the AH, rituals, and meaning behind the *nazms*. At the same time, without the boundaries and defined expectations of traditional transmission spaces, these platforms have also created prospects for interactions and collaborative efforts with the non-AH community.

The Future and Concluding Remarks

“Traditional” processes and methods of transmission are very much alive among the AH of Gurān, even though they might take new forms of expression. These conventional processes continue to safeguard and sustain the culture and therefore the community. Nevertheless, new modes of transmission including the use of tools such as social media, the focus on the instrumental rendition of the *nazms* in music academies, staged concerts, and collaboration with musicians from other music cultures in Iran, are definitely causing transformations, and in some cases only a partial transmission of the material and the AH ethos. The new transmission methods, material, and aspirations may be compared to a collage or a quilt that is made with “thousands” of pieces of fabric, taking ideas from the patterns of the original interwoven entities, and creating and adding new ones. At the end however, these “quilts,” even as transformed variations, continue to be transmitted in the forms and representations that are reminiscent of the past, though not quite the same. Yet, these variant quilts or collages are not here for decoration; they are very beautiful, colorful, endeared, and living entities that continue to represent the AH identity and community and sustain it as it moves forward and bears new fruit. Whatever the changes in the AH’s process of transmitting knowledge, the communal embodiment of lofty ideas, such as having love and respect for the religion and the very existence of the AH, remains a constant. Attempts to save the AH musical culture in its original form—from preserving the *nazms* to the idea of the *tanbur* as a sacred instrument—or partial, mixed, and changed portrayals, “embodies the virtues” (Feintuch 2001:151) of the AH community. It is important to note that the AH community is very much alive, with strong roots to help it survive for centuries. Therefore, even changes are continuously and deeply tested and assessed and still rooted in “old ways” of being. Regardless of the real or imagined time period and place of living, a metaphorical home is readily brought to existence through performing and transmitting the music. Performance and transmission of musical knowledge is a “performance of the belief” (Hooshmandrad 2004), and thus it transmits and sustains the religion. As mentioned previously, communal embodiment of lofty ideas such as experiencing love and respect for the AH religion and the community’s existence and prosperity, are also transmitted through the practices. Self-inquiry and contemplation of the past, present, and future as well as interaction with the outside world regenerate, sustain, and transform practices and the community all at once.

Finally, I wish to affirm that my main goal in writing or speaking about the AH is to share what I have learned about my fellow global citizens, and that my focus is first and foremost on the wellbeing of these communities. In fact, writing this article itself is an act of conservation

and transmission, helping to sustain and empower the AH community through valuing and presenting the process. One may think of it as applied ethnomusicology, or simply acting as a human being connected with others. I hope to do more in the future as I learn from the younger generation of the AH community.

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¹⁰ HS (Hejri Shamsi) stands for the Iranian Solar Calendar.

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