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Contemplating the Tanbur of the Kurdish Ahl-i Haqq of Guran: A Biographical Organology*

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“The religion of Yari is righteous and pure, perfect as the string of the tanbur”

[Din-i yar rasta-o paka bi aiba waki tal-i tamura]¹

Introduction²

The tanbur³ is the sacred instrument of the Kurdish Ahl-i Haqq (AH) people, literally, “the people of the truth.” Central to the AH religion and the daily life of the people, the instrument bears special meaning for the AH. Every time a tanbur is made, it goes through a process of construction and transformation in which material objects become a spiritual entity. A number of topics are important in contemplating, discussing, and analyzing the meaning associated with the tanbur. These include the construction process, tradition and change, significance of sound in all aspects of construction, devotional approach and sacraliza-

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1. *Abedin Jaf* (sacred text), *Daftar-e Abedin Jaf (Abedina)* [The Book of Abedin Jaf (Abedina)], collection and copy Kaka-Ahmad Ahmadi (collected in Kirkuk, Iraq and copied in Zahaw, Iran, 1963/64 to 1994 [1342 HS to Mehr 1373 HS]), 34. HS stand for “Hejri Shamsi” which refers to the Iranian solar calendar. The holy texts of the Ahl-i Haqq are indicated by the words “sacred text” in the citation of the pertinent sources. Transliteration of non-English words is based on the way words are pronounced. In the author’s PhD dissertation, the Library of Congress romanization system for Kurdish and Persian has been partially used for non-English words.

2. This article is based on Chapter 2 of the author’s PhD dissertation, Partow Hooshmandrad, *Performing the Belief: Sacred Musical Practice of the Kurdish Ahl-i Haqq of Guran* (Ph.D diss., Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, 2004).

3. *Tamura* in Kurdish. Also, even though the word tanbur is written as such, it is pronounced as *tambur*.

tion, preservation efforts, changing attitudes towards the ownership of the tanbur, current religious and socio-economic status of the instrument, and the perpetual sacred presence of the instrument in all contexts. The legendary Farmani family tanbur makers of Gahwara in Guran⁴ are bearers of important knowledge concerning the instrument. In an extended interview, Ostad⁵ Assad-Allah Farmani sheds light on these issues. Of particular significance in tackling the questions of origins and historical meaning for the AH, as well as presenting their point of view, are the body of the AH sacred poems, the narratives, and the way the AH people perceive their history.

The Ahl-i Haqq, aspects of the religious practice, and the tanbur. The AH, or Yarsan,⁶ is a unique religion with the fundamental teaching that following the original stage of nothingness or absolute oneness, and after the explosion of the “pre-existent pearl,” God manifests itself in a cyclic manner in terms of a sevenfold power referred to as the Haftan.⁷ The first earthly cycle of the manifestation of the AH religion is believed to date to the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries, when Sultan⁸ Sahak⁹ Barzanji is thought to have revealed this faith in the Kurdish Hawramanat region. Although respectful of all religions, the people of AH are not Muslims or Sufis by definition. The majority of the AH people are Kurds who live in the Kermanshah province in Iran and in other parts of the

4. Guran is a region in the Kermanshah province of Iran.

5. Literally “master” in a particular craft.

6. Also Yaresan or Yarestan. Another name for the religion of AH, possibly the original one. Plausible translations include “the [divine] nation/territory of Yari (comradeship, friendship, or service),” “the friends of Sultan,” or “the [divine] friend, Sultan.”

7. Literally, “the seven entities/bodies.” The seven sacred entities of the AH religion. Other numbers are also significant in this worldview.

8. Literally “king.”

9. With various spellings and pronunciations. A variety of dates have been indicated by some scholars centering around the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. However, it is not clear what historical source, if any, has been used for reaching this conclusion. In fact, no reliable source seems to exist in historical sources or the body of the literature, on the birthdate of Sultan Sahak. Additionally, the birthdate of Sultan may not be deduced even from the endowment document at the shrine of Baba Yadegar (one of the seven sacred entities of the AH who has manifestations in all AH cycles), in the village of Zarda in Iran. This is because the sacred entities in the AH religious worldview are thought of as omnipresent, appearing in various cycles of earthly and “divine” life, and therefore not attached to a specific and linear historical time period.

world with the same or slightly different titles. The AH in the Guran region, presented here with special concentration on the Khamushi and Yadegari Families,¹⁰ is known for maintaining the oldest tradition of the AH practices.

All elements in the AH religion work in an interconnected manner to create a level of spiritual purification believed to invoke the presence of the “divine king,” Sultan. Among others, these include the texts, the musical instrument tanbur, the sacred and non-sacred vocal and instrumental musical repertoire, and the rituals, at the heart of which is the sacred ritual of blessing of the food, *Jam*. The spiritual meaning of *Jam* is the presence of the divine king, Sultan.¹¹

The tanbur as an important component, is an embodiment of various aspects of the AH religion. It is a manifestation of one of the Haftan,¹² and secretly holds the message of the presence of the divine.¹³ It is the instrument with which the sacred musical repertoire of the AH is performed and the sacred texts are sung. It may be present in the ritual of blessing of the food, where, even when it is not sounded in an accompanying chanting session, it is considered a participant in the *Jam* (*Jam-neshin*)¹⁴ and receives a portion (*bash*)¹⁵ of the blessed food (*niyaz* or

10. Family with a capital “F” used here for the AH word *khandan* which is used to designate a branch of the AH religion. *Khandan* literally means “family,” “line,” or “dynasty,” as in a spiritual dynasty. Any of the spiritual “dynasties,” “lines,” or “families” of the AH religion. Eleven *khandans* for the AH are indicated by Mohammad-Ali Soltani, *Joghrafiya-ye Tarikhi va Tarikh-e Mofassal-e Kermanshahan jeld-e 10 Tarikh-e Khandanha-ye Haqiqat: Mashahir-e Mot’akhhher-e Ahl-e Haqq dar Kermanshah* [The Historical Geography and Comprehensive History of the Province of Kermanshah, vol. 10 History of the Families of Haqiqat (the Truth): The Well Known Contemporary Figures of AH in Kermanshah], 10 vols. (Tehran: Soha, 2001/2 [1380 HS]), 17.

11. A *Jam* ritual may include a *kalam* session (chanting of the sacred part of the musical repertoire. *kalam* also generally refers to the body of the sacred poems of the AH). See Partow Hooshmandrad, *Performing the Belief*, 30–37, for more information on the meaning of *Jam*.

12. There is disagreement about which of the Haftan it represents.

13. Unknown Author (sacred text), *Daftar-e Diwan-e Gawra (Daftar-e Perdiwari)* [The Book of Diwan-e Gawra or The Book of Perdiwari], collection, copy, and introduction Fereydon Daneshwar (Kermanshah, Iran, no date), 30–32.

14. The picture of the Pir (the spiritual leader) or the tanbur, when present, are considered participants in the *Jam*. In the case of the Pir, even in the absence of a picture, he is considered present at the *Jam* and a sacred portion is set aside for him.

15. A portion of the spiritual power of the divine in the AH religion that might be received imperceptibly or more tangibly through the blessed food.

shokrana).¹⁶ The tanbur is greeted by kissing, in both the ritual of *Jam* and when approached in casual settings. It is hung in the best part of an AH's home as a sacred icon with a constant purifying effect.

Research and analyses, contemporary scholarly sources on the tanbur of the Ahl-i Haqq.¹⁷ In terms of contemporary published sources, two scholars have provided particularly informative works with regard to the tanbur of AH. Sayyid¹⁸ Khalil Ali-Nezhad, a member of the AH community, was an active scholar of AH-related topics such as the tanbur and the AH texts as well as a tanbur player. Ali-Nezhad's book on the history of the tanbur, *Tanbur: Az Dirbaz ta Konun*¹⁹ consists of a detailed compilation of sources with information on the tanbur, including dictionaries, encyclopedias, old treatises, Persian classical poetry, engravings at historical sites, and other scholarly works. He also lists the variations of the instrument around the world. Focusing on the tradition of the Sahna²⁰ region, he

16. An AH vow and ritual that does not include animal sacrifice. Also blessed food that does not include animal sacrifice. The food that is used for the *niyaz* ritual usually includes candies, nuts, and fruits (pomegranates are especially important because they represent the spirit of Baba Yadegar of the Haftan). A special type of bread called *gerda* may also be blessed for the *niyaz* ritual. The food items for the *niyaz* are blessed through a special spoken prayer in *Jam*. The sacred segment of the musical repertoire of the AH may accompany this ritual.

17. The ethnographic details, analyses, and commentary presented here are based on the study of all aspects of the AH's life since the year 2000. The study has embraced the close reading of the body of the sacred texts, the languages, the tanbur, the vocal and instrumental musical repertoire and performance practice, the rituals, and the AH's daily life. The organological information is based on Ustad Asad-Allah Ustad Farmani's model of construction for the most part. The Farmanis are the best known tanbur makers in Guran.

18. Literally "sir," "master," "lord," "leader." In the AH religion, Sayyid is a person with apparent blood link to the Sultan Sahak Barjanji (the incarnation of God in the AH religion). There does not seem to be an indication in the body of the sacred poems of AH, as to female Sayyids not being able to bless the food. Nevertheless, it is the custom of the AH that normally only male Sayyids are permitted to perform the rituals for the blessing of the food. This is done with the help of a *khadem* ("servant of the *Jam*"), who does not have to be a Sayyid. In Islam, a Sayyid refers to a person with blood lineage to the prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatema Zahra and her husband and cousin of the prophet, Ali. The Sayyids in the AH religion and Islam are not related, although some old documents attempt to link the AH lineage back to the Shi'i Imams (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through Fatema Zahra and Ali).

19. Sayyid-Khalil Ali-Nezhad, *Tanbur: Az Dirbaz ta Konun* [The Tanbur: From Ancient Times to the Present] (Tehran: Danesh va Fan, 1997 [1376 HS]).

20. A region in the province of Kermanshah. The Guran and Sahna regions have differing views regarding some of the details of the AH practices.

discusses the playing technique, the physical characteristics and construction of the tanbur with pictures of the tools and partly-finished segments of tanburs, and simplified transcriptions of fourteen tanbur *maqams*.²¹

Mohammad-Reza Darvishi includes a section on the tanbur in his encyclopedia of the musical instruments of Iran.²² The article on the Kermanshah tanbur includes general information about the AH and the tanburs of the Sahna and Guran regions, lists of the prevalent *maqams* in each region, as well as construction measurements. He has done a comparative study of the fretting of eight different tanburs from various periods, and has included exact intervallic measurements in terms of cents.²³ This raises the question, especially for the older tanburs, of the certainty of unchanged position of the frets, though Darvishi seems to be aware of this problem.²⁴ A segment on the playing technique of the tanbur is quite thorough.²⁵

The Farmani Family and the Tanbur

Ostad Asad-Allah Farmani is a well-known tanbur maker in the town of Gahwara, about twenty minutes away from the sacred village of Tutshami (fig. 1). His family has made tanburs for the last seven generations. He believes that he and his family have been given the gift of making the sacred instrument of the AH by God, and that at the present

21. Literally "status" or "place." A general term normally used for melodic and scalar modes of Middle Eastern musical practices. *Maqam* or *nazm* are used by the AH to refer to each melody or melodic mode (metered or non-metered), of the repertoire of the music that is played on the tanbur and sung. *Nazm*, literally "order." A structured musical entity. Word used to refer to modes or pieces in Kurdish music; Abd al-Rahman-Sharafkandi Hazhar, *Hanbana Burina: Farhange Kurdi-Farsi* [The Magical Container: Kurdish-Persian Dictionary], 2nd ed., (Tehran: Soroush, 1997-98 [1376 HS]), 883. The AH *nazms* are perceived as melodies with prescribed manners in which the texts fit the melodies. These *nazms* are not seen as models for composition and improvisation; little variation is permitted. In the Guran region the word *zikh* is also sometimes used in the sacred poems to refer to group chanting or the group *haqiqi* (true or divine) *nazms*.

22. Mohammad-Reza Darvishi, "Tanbur: Kermanshahan" [The Tanbur: Kermanshah] in *Daerat al-Ma'arefe Sazha-ye Iran vol. 1, Sazha-ye Zehi-ye Mezrabi va Arshui-ye Navahi-ye Iran* [The Encyclopedia of the Musical Instruments of Iran vol. 1, The Plucked and Bowed Stringed Instruments of the Regions of Iran] (Tehran: Mahoor, 2001/2 (1380 HS), 303-338.

23. *Ibid.*, 316-31.

24. *Ibid.*, 317.

25. *Ibid.*, 331-34.

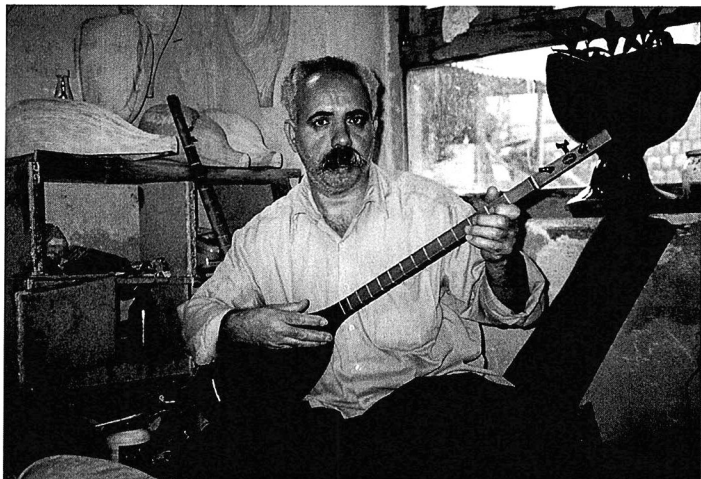


FIGURE 1. Ostad Farmani, one of the most important tanbur makers of the Guran region in his workshop in Gahwara. All photos by the author.

time, he is receiving from the Pir,²⁶ A²⁷ Sayyid Nasr al-Din Haydari,²⁸ all his energy and gift for making excellent tanburs.

At the workshop.²⁹ Ostad Farmani's workshop was a small, clean, and bright room with a high ceiling, a floor covered with freshly carved wood

26. Literally "old," or "elder." A title used by the AH and some Sufi groups to refer to their spiritual guide. Pir is also used by Zoroastrians for the same purpose, Mohammad Moin, *Farhang-e Farsi (Motavasset)* [Persian Dictionary (Medium)], 6 vols., 4th ed. (Tehran: Amir-Kabir, 1981/82 [1360 HS]), vol. 1, 884.

27. Short for *Aqa*. Literally "sir" or "lord." Normally, the syllable "A," an abbreviation of *Aqa*, is used before an AH Sayyid's name to display respect. Generally, the names of all AH Pirs of Guran begin with this syllable.

28. The current Pir of the AH of Guran of the Khamushi Family. Also revered as Pir by the Yadegari Family of AH. The son of A Sayyid Sayf al-Din (the nephew of A Sayyid Sham al-Din, the previous Pir).

29. During my stay in the Guran region since the year 2000, I learned much about the tanbur, the *nazms* that were played on the tanbur, its playing technique, and the meaning of the tanbur based on the AH texts and for the AH people. I also visited Ostad Farmani's workshop several times. However, most of my exhaustive organological notes on Ostad Farmani's model of construction, and his thought processes and

scraps, and a tiny old black heater, which was shining with beautiful yellowish orange light (figs. 2–4). Sayyid Abbas Daman-Afshan and Ostad Taher Yar-Waysi,³⁰ Ostad Farmani's colleagues who had kindly offered to accompany me, sat on one of the benches by the window, and I sat on the floor, next to Ostad Farmani.

I began my interview by asking Ostad Farmani his biography. After introducing himself, his immediate priority was naming his ancestors, starting from the person who is remembered as the first to have made tanburs in his family. The names of the masters of the Farmani family in successive generations are as follows: Ostad Farman, Ostad Solayman, and Ostad Fath-Ali (who all lived before A Sayyid Beraka's time),³¹ Ostad Hosayn, Ostad Changiz, Ostad Shams-Allah, and finally Ostad Farmani himself and his three brothers Ostad Yad-Allah, Ostad Ezzat-Allah, and Ostad Fardin.

To eliminate any sense of separation between the tanbur maker and the performance practice of the tanbur, which includes the knowledge of playing and singing the *nazms*,³² Ostad Farmani stressed that they were all first and foremost tanbur players and *kalam-khwans*³³ and instrument makers secondarily. To prove his point he recounted the story of one of his predecessors Ostad Fath-Ali. Around one or two o'clock on a dark winter night in Gahwara, Ostad Fath-Ali starts singing the *nazm* Tana-Miri.³⁴ At this point, while sweeping the snow off his roof, a man called Kadkhoda Haji in another village, called Chaqabur-e Rahman, hears Ostad Fath-Ali. Kadkhoda Haji comes down from the roof asking for his saddle to be prepared on his horse, tells his family he is going to Gahwara because he has heard the voice of Ostad Fath-Ali and it has

experiences during construction, were gathered during one of my visits to Gahwara in January 2003, when I asked the master for an extended meeting time.

30. Highly respected teachers, and textual and musical experts from Guran.

31. Born in 1795/96 (1210 HQ). HQ stands for Hejri Qamari, the Iranian Lunar Calendar. See Soltani, *Joghrafiya-ye Tarikhi va Tarikh-e Mofassal-e Kemanshahan*, 38. A Sayyid Beraka was believed by the AH to be a manifestation of Dawud (of the Haftan) and eventually all of the Haftan. With his 36 poets, he revived the AH religion around two hundred years ago.

32. See note 21 for the meaning of *nazm*.

33. Literally "chanter of the sacred texts" and/or "chanter of the sacred *nazms*." An individual with expertise in singing the sacred *nazms* of the AH religion. Most of the time, this person also knows how to play the tanbur and accompanies himself on the tanbur.

34. The *nazm* played by Ostad Fath-Ali was determined after those present quickly re-checked their memory of it with each other.



FIGURE 2. Ostad Farmani in his workshop.

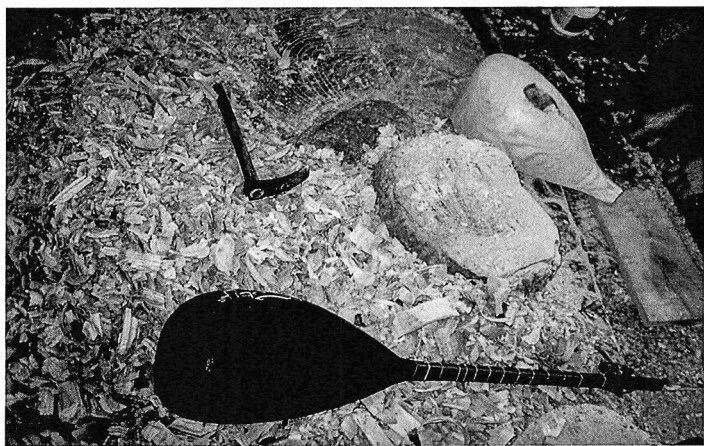


FIGURE 3. One of the oldest tanburs in the Farmani family and the floor of the workshop covered with freshly carved wood scraps.

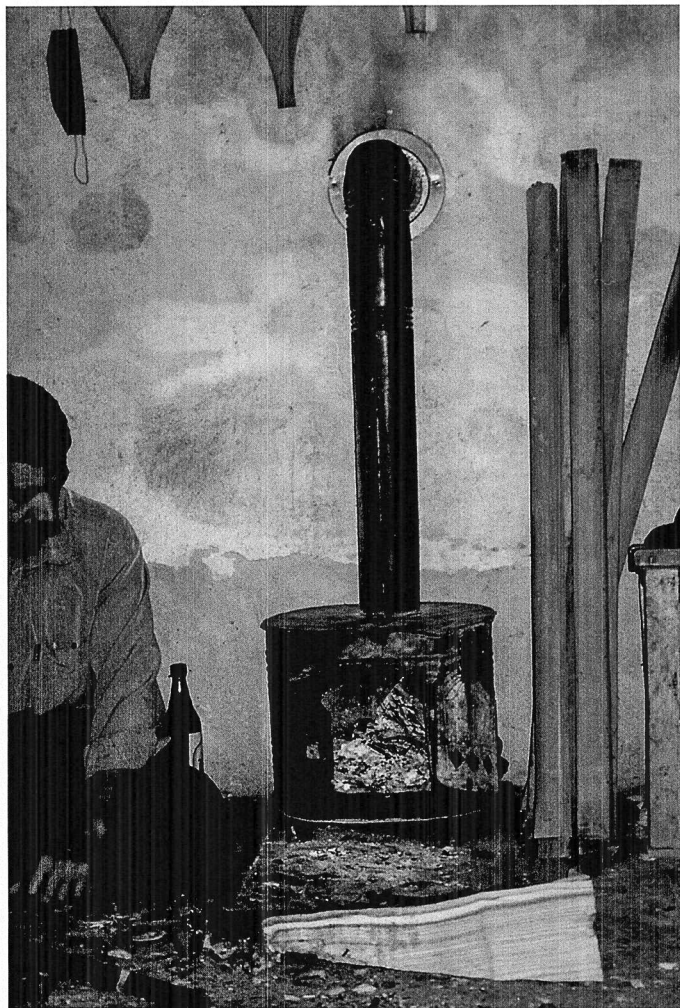


FIGURE 4. The tiny old black heater, shining with beautiful yellowish orange light.

“put fire to his soul.”³⁵ He goes to Gahwara, taking with him one or two sheep as a gift, and sits with Ostad Fath-Ali till morning as he sings and plays for Kadkhoda Haji. When Ostad Fath-Ali is asked why he decided to sing at that hour, he responds, “all of a sudden I felt moved to sing Tana-Miri and I did it.” I asked Ostad Farmani what had triggered his own enthusiasm for playing and making the tanbur, he fondly recalled his grandfather, Ostad Changiz, whose playing had touched his heart forever. He learned to play the tanbur from his grandfather from the early age of five or six.³⁶

The number of the tanburs, changing attitudes towards ownership, and the socio-economic status of the tanbur. As if to trace the people through their instruments, and possibly feeling that instruments are the ultimate signatures left by instrument makers, Ostad Farmani continued by accounting for tanburs made by the master instrument makers in his family that are still undamaged and/or used. No tanburs are left from the first three masters, but starting with the oldest tanburs remaining from the past, he showed me one made by Ostad Hosayn that was made probably within the last two hundred years (fig. 5).

The date on the body of the tanbur, 1791 (1170 HS),³⁷ is an approximate date put on the instrument after the actual date had disappeared. In order to ensure people will remember that it belongs to the past, the decision was made by A Sayyid Wali Hosayni, the late *kalam-khwan* of Gahwara, and Ostad Changiz, Ostad Farmani’s grandfather, to put this new approximate date on the instrument. The knowledge about the engraving of the “approximate date” transmitted to each generation is indication that there is no intention to purposefully distort dates or events.

A peculiar anecdote is connected to this particular tanbur. The handwriting of Ostad Hosayn engraved on the side of the tanbur indicates that anyone who buys it should make a vow for a *nazr*³⁸ to sacrifice a bull

35. This story is reiterated in Ostad Taher Yar-waysi’s unpublished epic poem on the history of the tanbur players, *kalam-khwans*, and *daftar-khwans* (experts in the reading and interpreting the books of the AH sacred poems).

36. The best known tanbur players of the region have started playing from an early age.

37. The decision was made by all, that this date must be according to the solar and not the lunar calendar that would have been prevalent at the time.

38. An AH vow and ritual that includes only sacrificed male animals such as bull, ram, goat, and rooster. Boars might have been used in the past as well for this ritual. Also blessed food that only includes sacrificed animals. This food is blessed through

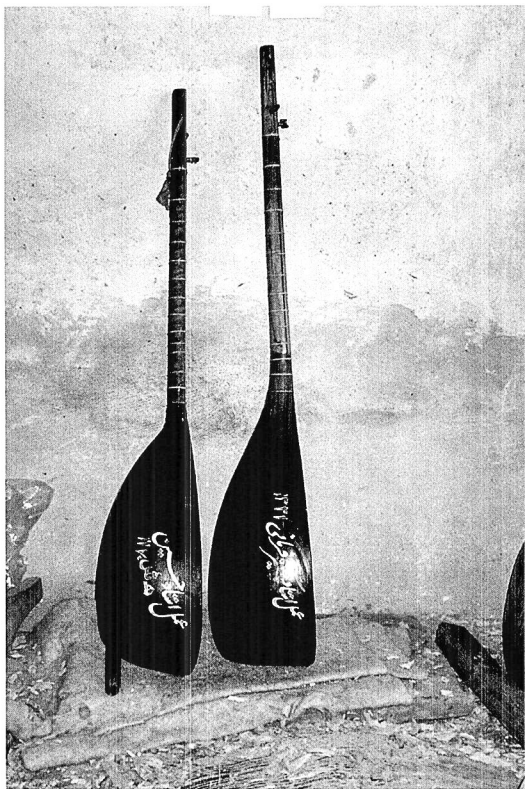


FIGURE 5. The oldest tanburs that remain from the master tanbur makers in the Farmani family. On the left is Ostad Hosayn's tanbur and on the right Ostad Changiz's tanbur.

special spoken prayers in *Jam*. Normally music does not accompany the ritual of blessing of the food for *nazr*. However, *nazr* is always accompanied by several instances of the *niyaz* ritual (see note 16 for the description of *niyaz*), including the *niyaz* of a head of sugar for blessing the knife before the *nazr*, and the *niyaz* of fruit and candies after the *nazr*. The sacred segment of the musical repertoire may be performed with the *niyaz* blessing segments.

on the sacred site of Baba Yadegar (one of the Haftan of the AH). The engraving goes on to say that even if Hosayn—the master instrument maker—himself sells it, he must perform the same *nazr*. No one would have been able to afford a whole bull, which would have cost around ten *riyals*,³⁹ a large amount of money at the time of Ostad Hosayn. Therefore, this tanbur had remained in the Farmani family, unsold, although it has been played from time to time, and is kept in the Farmani family's workshop. Another tanbur by Ostad Hosayn also remains that belongs to the current Pir, A Sayyid Nasr al-Din Haydari. This instrument is made from the mulberry trees of the pilgrimage site of Baba Yadegar, which means it is cherished even more dearly. Ostad Hosayn's tanbur at the workshop might have been made with the same wood as well; Ostad Farmani was not completely certain of this, however.

The third oldest tanbur, also kept in Ostad Farmani's workshop, was made in 1951/52 (1330HS) by Ostad Changiz (fig. 5). According to Ostad Farmani, about forty or fifty of Ostad Changiz's tanburs are in the possession of various AH individuals. Six or seven tanburs were made by Ostad Shams-Allah, Ostad Farmani's father, and finally, according to Ostad Farmani himself, more than one thousand of his own tanburs were in the possession of AH and non-AH individuals within Iran and elsewhere overseas, as of 2003. The number has increased significantly since then.

The increase in the number of the tanburs made may illustrate a changed attitude toward the ownership of the tanbur as a sacred instrument by the AH people as well as by non-AH individuals in comparison to at least the last two hundred years. First, more AH individuals are buying the tanbur to possess as a religious icon⁴⁰ and/or to play even though the AH people have long had the practice of keeping and regarding the tanbur as an icon in their homes. There, it is usually hung on the wall in an important part of the room, typically the space reserved for *Jam-khana* (literally “the place/house of the *Jam*”), where the ritual of blessing the food and/or *kalam* sessions would take place. However, in the past, the quantity of these tanburs was limited. Perhaps because of an overall improvement in material living conditions in modern-day Iran despite the serious economic crisis of the country, and because of the relatively modest price of the tanburs, more people now can afford to buy a

39. Unit of currency in Iran.

40. In some respect similar to the Christian idea of owning a crucifix.

tanbur. In addition, since the early 1980s, there have been new efforts by the AH (usually initiated by the Pir) to strengthen the religion through preserving important practices such as playing the tanbur and singing the *nazms* of the region. This has been done mainly by setting up practice sessions and tanbur classes, in which both the sacred and the non-sacred *nazms* that belong to the tanbur repertoire⁴¹ of the region are practiced and taught. As a result, more AH, ranging from small children to older adults, including more women, have become enthusiastic about playing the tanbur.

Furthermore, at least for the last two decades, the tanbur is more recognized in Iran by Iranians and around the world by Iranian émigrés as the sacred musical instrument of the AH and treated as a valued item of Kurdish and Iranian culture. More non-AH individuals from all sectors of the society, including Shi'a and Sunni Muslims in Iran and overseas, are buying an instrument simply to own it. For example, at least fifty of Ostad Farmani's tanburs were in the United States in 2003, and up to a hundred in 2015, some owned by people who have not yet learned to play the instrument. His tanburs are also housed in several museums, according to the master himself. Notably, even though it is not considered sacred for these non-AH individuals, the tanbur is respected and regarded highly by them. Moreover, both female and male musicians want to buy the tanbur in order to play it, despite the fact that the sacred segment of the repertoire usually is not taught to non-AH individuals. Until now, for the most part, these musicians have picked up *nazms* from regions other than Guran for their various endeavors such as teaching and public concerts. The Guran region, with its unique *nazms* and performance practice, has only recently started opening up to the outsiders who are interested in playing the musical repertoire of the Guran region.

The growing interest of the AH people in owning a tanbur, as well as the increasing desire by non-AH individuals to play the tanbur, in addition to a more open stance on the part of the AH (especially regarding playing the non-sacred *nazms*), have resulted in an increased number of tanburs sold. The tanburs are sold for a very modest price, largely because of the control of the Pir. This has been motivated by several reasons. First, with the growing attractiveness of the tanbur for the AH and non-AH public, the Pir does not want some individuals to buy the inex-

41. The musical repertoire of the AH that is played on the tanbur and sung, is referred to as "the tanbur repertoire."

pensive tanburs from the region and sell them for several times the amount in big cities such as Tehran. He believes this would eventually increase the price of all tanburs, resulting in fewer people with modest salaries capable of owning a tanbur. This, in turn, would affect the number of individuals who play the tanbur and, therefore, the preservation and perpetuation of religious practices as a whole. Second, he believes that setting a high price for the tanbur would commoditize it, and in order to honor its sacredness and prevent it from becoming a commodity, the price must stay at a modest level.⁴² Thus, the price of the tanbur has changed very little, especially those made by Ostad Farmani and other tanbur makers of the Guran region. A tanbur made by Ostad Farmani and his family costs between \$700–\$1000 (US) as of March 2015.

Not only is Ostad Farmani untroubled by this restriction on the price of the tanbur, he even favors it. He believes everything he has is dependent upon the sacred presence of the Pir; he lives by an absolute heartfelt obedience for the word of the Pir, and he has a strong conviction about honoring the sacredness of the tanbur. Non-AH musicians, too, are careful not to violate this decision by the Pir.

The Question of Origins: The Tanbur of Ahl-i Haqq as an Absolute Idea

Whether it is directly related to the long necked lutes from 3000 BCE as postulated by musicologists,⁴³ or it *is* indeed an instrument from more ancient times as popularly believed by the AH, or it is a later development of similar looking instruments with the same name from the past, the tanbur of Kermanshah, as it is known in Iran, or *tamura* as it is pronounced in Kurdish, is at the present time considered the sacred instrument of the AH, with a unique organology and a musical repertoire of its own. It is the only melodic instrument that is approved by the AH of Guran for playing the musical repertoire, including the non-sacred *nazms*.⁴⁴ Unlike other regions where the *daf*⁴⁵ may also occasionally be

42. A Sayyid Nasr al-Din, Haydari (the Pir), personal communication with author (Kermanshah, 2000–Present).

43. Scheherazade Qassim Hassan and others, “Tanbūr,” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed April 1, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.htmlproxy.lib.csufresno.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/52071>, 518.

44. See note 21.

45. Framed drum usually used in the chanting sessions of some Sufi groups and in some secular musical practices in Iran.

played in the AH *kalam* sessions,⁴⁶ it is never played in the *kalam* sessions of the Guran region.

In his book on the tanbur, Ali-Nezhad discusses possible meanings of the word “tanbur” from various sources. Among the most interesting translations he presents are “the scratching of the heart” from a sixteenth-century source and “the bitter gourd,” because of its possible history of being made with gourd, and his own hypothesized translation of “with cord.”⁴⁷ He also provides references made to the designation “tanbur” in pre-Islamic sources (before the mid-seventh century),⁴⁸ all confirming the old origins of instrument(s) with the title tanbur. One pre-Islamic reference in particular points clearly to the ritual use of the tanbur among other accompanying instruments used while the “pure” ones recite/chant the Avesta, the sacred book of Zoroastrians.⁴⁹

Furthermore, among the historical sources that especially focus on the tanbur,⁵⁰ Farabi’s (873–950 CE) treatise, *Ketab-e Musiqi-ye Kabir* [The Great Book of Music] stands out.⁵¹ He discusses two kinds of tanburs, tanbur-e Baqdadi (the tanbur of Baghdad) found in Iraq⁵² and its surrounding lands and west and south of Iraq, and tanbur-e Khorasani (the tanbur of Khorasan⁵³) in Khorasan, its surroundings and the areas in the east and north of Khorasan.⁵⁴ Although organological information as

46. See note 11.

47. Ali-Nezhad, *Tanbur: Az Dirbaz ta Konun*, 60–61.

48. See Ali-Nezhad, *Tanbur: Az Dirbaz ta Konun*. Also for a brief discussion of possible origins of the tanbur, see Jean During, *Musiqi va Erfan: Sonnat-e Ahl-e Haqq* [Music and Mysticism: The AH Tradition], (Tehran: French Institute for Iranian Studies in Iran, 1999/2000 [1378 HS]), 62–65.

49. Ali-Nezhad, *Tanbur: Az Dirbaz ta Konun*, 71.

50. See the following for more detailed discussions of the history of the tanbur and variations and derivatives of it around the world: Scheherazade Qassim Hassan and others, “Tanbur;” Ali-Nezhad, *Tanbur: Az Dirbaz ta Konun*; and Mahdi Foruq, “Alat-e Musiqi-ye Iran va Khavar-e Miyaneh: Tanbur [The Musical Instruments of Iran and the Middle East: The Tanbur],” *Ketab-e Sal-e Sheyda 1* (Tehran: Ketab-e Khorshid. 1992–93 [1371 HS]): 279–292 (first published in *Majalle-ye Musiqi* 1958–59 [1337 HS]).

51. Abu-Nasr Farabi, *Ketab-e Musiqi-ye Kabir: Honar-e Dowrunum Alat-e Musiqi* [The Great Book of Music: The Second Art the Musical Instruments], trans. and ed. by Abolfazl Eslandust-Bafanda (original date 933 to 940 [322 to 329 HQ] repr. and trans. Tehran: Part, 1996 [Summer 1375 HS]).

52. Iraq at the time of Farabi would have had a different geographical description compared to the present time.

53. A province in north-eastern Iran. Khorasan in Farabi’s text refers to the older Khorasan which included a larger area than the current province of Khorasan in Iran.

54. Farabai, *Ketab-e Musiqi-ye Kabir*, 48.

well as specifics about the measurements and placing of the frets and various tunings is discussed in Farabi's treatise, it is extremely difficult to determine whether and how the repertoires and actual performance practices of the current Kermanshah tanbur and the older tanburs might have been related in any way, if at all.

In considering the AH religious sources for investigating the tanbur's religious meaning and its origins as the sole instrument of the AH religion, the body of the AH poems may be illustrative. First, there is no doubt about its sanctity and special status in the poems. Even though other instruments have been mentioned in the body of the poems, the tanbur has the most revered and distinctive presence. In these texts, the tanbur is directly connected with the divine, the Haftan, and the AH religion; indeed, its sound signals the presence of the "divine king." The tanbur is present at the "divine gathering" (*bazm-e haqqani*), and it is the instrument for expressing gratitude to the divine.⁵⁵

Attempting to find the physical-historical time of the tanbur's first adoption by the AH religion, through the study of the AH texts, is more difficult. *Daftar-e Nawruz*⁵⁶ describes the time when Baba Khwashin (a manifestation of Khawandkar),⁵⁷ possibly sometime in the tenth century,⁵⁸ intends to construct the idea of the divine group-chanting and bestows this gift to the Haftan, with Shah Khwashin himself leading the *kalam* session.⁵⁹ The presence of the tanbur is not directly mentioned in this verse, but is indicated by way of suggestion. The tanbur is also pointed to as the "instrument of the gathering of Shah Khwashin" by way of suggestion in *Daftar-e Nawruz*.⁶⁰ Further, Baba Khwashin is indicated as the possessor of "the assemblies of nine-hundreds": "I am Khwashin Khwashin, the possessor of the [assembly] of nine-hundred I am Khwashin Khwashin (Khwashinem Khwashin, saheb nohsada Khwashinem Khwashin)."⁶¹ A reference is also made to the nine hundred

55. Comments and analyses are based on close reading of the canon of the AH texts, inferential reasoning by the author, and examining the conclusions through personal communication with the experts in the Guran region from 2000–2014.

56. Nawruz is one of the 36 poets of A Sayyid Beraka Haydari (see note 31).

57. The absolute idea of the divine.

58. Ostad Taher Yar-Waysi, personal communication with author (Gahwara, Iran, 2000–Present).

59. Nawruz Surani (sacred text), *Daftar-e Nawruz* [the Book of Nawruz], collection, copy, and digitization by the Kaka'i family, (Kermanshah, Iran, no date), 28–29.

60. *Ibid.*, 278–79.

61. Unknown Author (sacred text), *Daftar-e Diwan-e Gawra*, 79.

“blazing-candle” instruments in the *Daftar-e Nawruz*,⁶² hinting at an assembly of nine hundred tanburs. Most importantly, *Daftar-e Diwan-e Gawra* clearly indicates that the instrument Shah Khwashin chooses for signaling the news of his presence in the next cycle is the tanbur.⁶³

Moreover, *Daftar-e Abedin Jaf* points to the performance of the tanbur by Dawud of the Haftan,⁶⁴ with the *nazm* “Hay-Gyan Hay-Gyan [Oh-dear one/life Oh-dear one/life],” when Sultan assembles the celebration of his “servants,” i.e., the Haftan.⁶⁵ Dawud is also indicated as the “performer of the seventy-two *nazms* of the [divine] region,”⁶⁶ which suggests the instrument tanbur. Both of these are in reference to the cycle of Sultan Sahak in the AH worldview, which is believed to date to the Thirteenth-Fourteenth centuries.

Additionally, narratives also relate that the manifestation of the *nazms*, directly connected to the tanbur, begins sometime in the cycle of Shah Khwashin, discussed earlier. They say that the sacred *nazms* were later fully manifested during the cycle of Sultan Sahak, thus the designation “Perdiwari”⁶⁷ for the majority of the sacred *nazms*. However, they also instruct that Dawud of the Haftan, in the cycle of Sultan, brought the tanbur from Khorasan to Hawraman.

Was the tanbur already the instrument chosen for the AH religion at the Shah Khwashin cycle, in the AH worldview? A number of other questions also arise. The musical events taking place during Shah Khwashin’s cycle could be interpreted as the preparatory stage for the tanbur to become the sole instrument of the AH. But was the tanbur’s presence physical or in the “divine realm?” From a “mystical” point of view, or perhaps from the AH’s “historical” point of view (i.e., the narratives that are accepted as the events of their history), may we postulate that in Shah Khwashin’s cycle, the tanbur existed in the “divine consciousness,” and thus its presence for the AH is not connected to an earthly physical time? For the AH, since the tanbur is a manifestation of

62. Surani (sacred text), *Daftar-e Nowruz*, 159.

63. Unknown Author (sacred text), *Daftar-e Diwan-e Gawra*, 31.

64. Also pronounced as Dawed or Dawu, one of the Haftan during the cycle of Sultan Sahak Barzanji (see note 9). Other manifestations of Dawud in other cycles may also be referred to as Dawud.

65. *Abedin Jaf* (sacred text), *Daftar-e Abedin Jaf*, 45.

66. *Ibid.*, 34.

67. Perdiwar, with the possible literal meaning of “the other side of the bridge,” refers to the residence of Sultan Sahak Barzanji in the Hawramanat Kurdish region of Iran.

one of the Haftan, its essence is beyond time and place, as its body continues to represent the same spirit with every new tanbur made. In addition to its physical earthly definition and presence, is the tanbur then also a certain spiritual stature where “divine jewels” are hidden in or held by an illuminated body? Did Dawud “perform” the *nazms* of the AH in the timeless “divine realm” also? Did the idea of the tanbur as the sacred instrument of the AH exist in pre-eternity in the divine consciousness? Finally, is the tanbur of the AH connected to earthly time at all, or is it a timeless concept?

Based on the reading of the AH texts, perhaps it is impossible to postulate a time when the divine intends the tanbur to become the instrument of the AH. Hypothesizing about the exact spiritual representation of matters related to the tanbur in the view of the AH also requires even more extensive research into the texts and the collective knowledge and insight of the *daftar-khwans*⁶⁸ of the region. What may be said, however, is that all indications in the AH poems point to the tanbur’s special place in the divine realm. In addition, the musical repertoire and the tanbur are mentioned distinctly from the cycle of Shah Khwashin onward in the body of the texts. Narratives also tell that the musical repertoire that is played on the tanbur would be manifested gradually starting from the cycle of Shah Khwashin to sometime after the cycle of Sultan.

Thus, as a physical object and a musical instrument, the origin of the tanbur with the same name or other names might go back to ancient times, with or without any direct connection to the sacred, but to incorporate the worldview of the AH, the tanbur should be regarded as an “absolute idea” that has been “divinely” designed. To the AH, once it is divinely intended as the instrument with which the sacred *nazms* of the AH are played and sung, it is considered an illuminated and sacred entity, and this as if it has always been so.

I sought Ostad Farmani’s knowledge of any narratives from the past about the origins of the tanbur and the point when it becomes the instrument of the AH. However, it seemed that for him and others present, physical data such as these regarding a sacred entity were not extremely important. The calm unconcern for the exact origin of the tanbur and the apparent discrepancy between the narratives about Dawud bringing the instrument during Sultan’s cycle and the importance of the tanbur in the Shah Khwashin cycle signify a point about a separate type of

68. See note 33.

historical view that has no beginning or an end: what seemed important to Ostad Farmani was that the tanbur was the sacred instrument of the AH as an absolute idea, not when it was made or first named the tanbur, as if there were no beginning or end as to the designation of the tanbur as the sacred instrument of the AH. It was sufficient for him that, in terms of physical historical time, this instrument was known to be ancient or rooted in ancient times. In terms of the perception of the AH about possible connection of the current tanbur repertoire with past repertoires, one anecdote from their oral history is noteworthy. The AH *kalam-khwans* of Guran believe that the *nazm* Barya, one of the non-sacred *nazms* of the repertoire of Guran, was composed by Barbad, the legendary court musician of King Khosraw-Parviz (591–628 CE)⁶⁹ of the Sasanian dynasty in Iran.

The AH's view on history is considered by them as a separate yet valid view of history that is meant to communicate encapsulated spiritual wisdom and knowledge rather than exact events and clear times. This wisdom that is passed on carefully through generations is an important part of history as it is experienced by the AH. All the same, it is not unusual to ignore or distort exact historical facts in mystical literature or narratives in order to express certain ideas. This is done for two purposes: first, to use a fact or distortion of it to help communicate an inner truth, and second, to hint at the insignificance of actual facts in comparison to that inner truth.

Elahi Qomsha'i, in his selections of *Fih Ma Fih* of Mawlana (Rumi), criticizes scholars who are constantly looking for exact facts when it comes to Sufi literature. He offers an example from Rumi to illustrate his point. In one of his stories in which two important Sufi figures, Bayazid and Jonayd—who are not contemporaries in physical historical time—meet, Rumi explicitly utters that one should let go of the appearance of things in order to appreciate the heart of the matter. By this, Mawlana is asking the seeker of the truth to try to grasp the wisdom hidden in the story rather than concentrating on the chronological events or the “outer shell” of narratives.⁷⁰

69. Mary Boyce, ed. and trans., *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 23.

70. Hosayn Mohi-al-Din Elahi-Qomshai, *Gozide-ye Fih-e Ma Fih: Maqalat-e Mawlana* [Selections from *Fih-e Ma Fih: Discourses of Jalal al-Din Mohammad (Rumi)*], (Tehran: Entesharat va Amuzesh-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1992–93 [1371 HS]), 60, 222.

Nawruz Surani utters, “Tarikh-e Yari padeshahiyast,” which literally means the history of Yari, i.e., the history of the AH religion, is the AH’s [divine] kingdoms.⁷¹ This means one should not look for evidence of exact historical detail. Rather, the only important point is the “inner truth,” and its history is merely the expression of “the truth” through the various cycles of the manifestation of the Yari religion.⁷²

In terms of AH views on physical historical time, the custom for referring to the various cycles is also illuminating. Sultan Sahak’s central cycle (believed to date to the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) is used as a reference point for the previous or following cycles. For example, Shah Khwashin who is believed to have lived before Sultan, is also referred to as “Sultan,” and A Sayyid Beraka, who was born in 1785/96, is also referred to as the Dawud of the cycle of Sultan.

*The Story of a Tanbur from Construction⁷³ to Delivery:
Sound is Everything*

I asked Ostad Asad-Allah Ostad Farmani to talk specifically about how he would go about making a tanbur from the moment it is ordered up to the time when it is presented to the individual who ordered it. Knowing how dearly he loves the Pir, I asked Ostad Farmani to imagine that the Pir had asked him to make a tanbur. I wanted to put him in a heightened and joyful state so that he would also perhaps highlight the emotional and spiritual aspects of the process of construction.⁷⁴

Tradition, significance of using manual tools, and example of the bowl.

In discussing the construction process, Ostad Farmani began by talking about tradition. For the last seven generations, the Farmani family has worked according to tradition, which partially means working manually using conventional tools rather than electrical machinery (fig. 6). He uses two sizes of manual saws, a smaller one called *arra*⁷⁵ and a very large

71. Surani (sacred text), *Daftar-e Nawruz*, 156.

72. Sayyid Abbas Daman-Afshan, personal communication with author (Gahwara, Iran, 2000–Present). Yar-Waysi, personal communication with author.

73. For information on the construction of the tanburs, including the *tarki* tanburs, in regions such as Sahna and other general information, refer to Ali-Nezhad, *Tanbur: Az Dirbaz ta Konun*, 241–63, and Darvishi, “Tanbur: Kermanshahan,” 305–306 & 311–13.

74. See Figure 7 for a diagram of a tanbur made by Ostad Farmani. The transliteration of the words for the tools and the tanbur parts are based on the written and spoken Kurdish of the region.

75. Small manual saw.

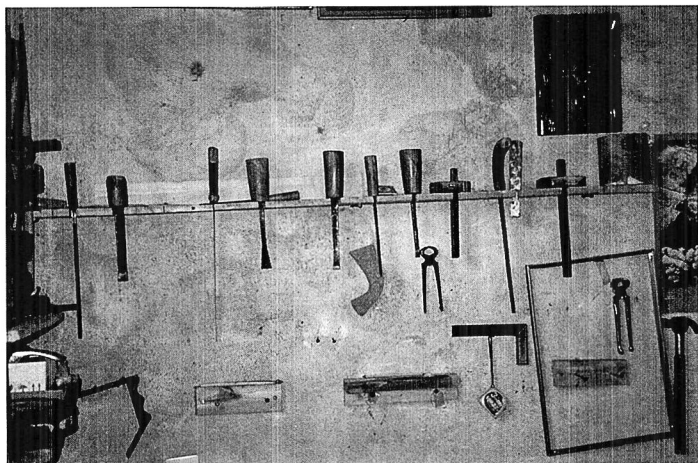


FIGURE 6. The tools in Ostad Farmani's workshop.

one called *mashar*⁷⁶ for cutting sections of a tree. Although the smaller saw he uses currently is as an exception, machine-made, with sharper, thinner, and more precise blades, it is modeled after the older hand-made saws. The large saw belongs to older times.

Other tools include three sizes of special flexible metal scrapers called *kana*.⁷⁷ The *kanas* he uses are handmade in Gahwara based on the old *kanas*. The master also honors the older *kanas* used by his predecessors—made about two hundred years ago—by keeping them at the workshop. These *kanas* are used for emptying and scraping the interior of the bowl (*kasa*). A flexible adze called *tisha*⁷⁸ (larger than the *kanas*), is used to scrape the exterior of the bowl, and another kind of scraper (smaller than the *kanas*) called *lisa*⁷⁹ is used for smoothing out the interior of the bowl.

76. "Large manual saw" used in the construction of the tanbur.

77. "Metal scraper" used for emptying and scraping the interior of the bowl in tanbur construction.

78. "Adze" for scraping the exterior of the bowl in tanbur construction.

79. Another kind of "scraper" like *kana* for smoothing out the interior of the bowl in tanbur construction.

Modern files (*sowan*)⁸⁰ are used mostly for the back of the bowl; a grater (*randa*) is used for the neck (*dasta*)⁸¹ and the belly/soundboard (*safha*)⁸² and precision work, with sandpaper (*sombada*) used after the grater. A chisel/gouge (*askana/meghar*)⁸³ empties the connection point of the neck to the bowl. Finally, manual drills (*matta*) are used for making the holes for the tuning pegs, although very rarely he also uses electrical drills for this purpose. In the past, the holes on the belly of the instrument were made with what Ostad Farmani calls manual “nail” drills. He still uses similar drills for making these holes.

Ostad Farmani looked especially pleased while he was talking about using traditional tools, and he pointed out that there was a real advantage in traditional tools, especially when it came to emptying the bowl. The scrapers he uses are extremely sharp and, therefore, leave the texture of the wood undamaged after scraping. In other words, in bowls emptied by these manual tools, with the grain staying intact, the texture retains its natural quality and evenness. By comparison, the texture in bowls scraped with machinery is uneven and the grooves that are so crucial to creating a desirable sound are broken and, therefore, ruined. As a result, the sound in machine-made bowls is “damped.” The thickness of the bowl itself also seemed to be inconsistent in the machine-made bowl, which is not the case in hand made bowls.⁸⁴

The master stressed that if a tanbur is well made, which partially means working with manual tools, the sound will improve over time. This is especially true of tanburs made with whole bowls that are worked on manually, and then whole bowl tanburs in general, as opposed to bowls made with ribs of wood (*tarki*).⁸⁵ Because the ribs are boiled before

80. “File” used in the construction of the tanbur.

81. The “t” is not vocalized in spoken Kurdish.

82. The “h” is not vocalized in spoken Kurdish.

83. Gouge used for emptying the connection point of the neck to the bowl in tanbur construction.

84. Here I was momentarily reminded of the preference to carve the inside of the *zarb* (percussion instrument of Iranian classical music) by hand in order to create a more desirable sound. Interestingly, in contrast to the tanbur, what creates the desirable sound in the *zarb* when made by hand, is the “bumpy” appearance of the inside of the *zarb* rather than a smooth surface. Mehdi Kamaliyan, personal communication with author (Tehran and Los Angeles 1990s).

85. The tanburs with bowls that are made with ribs of wood, rather than with one block of wood that is carved out. During suggests that the construction of the *tarki* tanburs might have started around 1951/52 (1330 HS), influenced by *setar* construction. See Jean During, *Musiqi va Erfan*, 68.

assembling, the *tarki* tanburs acquire a “dough-like” quality that ruins the texture of the wood, and therefore, it cannot really improve over time.

Tradition and change, the bowls, more volume, length of the neck.

Carrying the conversation to discussing how a modern-day tanbur differs from the past, Ostad Farmani took ownership of instruments made in his family. Their tanburs are modeled after the older versions, with some small differences, he said. According to Ostad Farmani, the length⁸⁶ of the bowl of the older tanburs were about 36 cm, whereas those of the newer bowls are about 40–42 cm. A longer bowl could help produce a bigger sound.

In addition, a thinner bowl and belly will produce more of a bass sound. Normally, thickness of the bowl is dependent upon the age of the wood. Aged wood such as 100–120 years old is so “pure” and “soft” in texture that a little extra thickness would not hurt the desired quality of sound, and the older bowls were generally thicker and made with consistent thickness. Newer woods that might be more coarse should not be more than 2 mm for the sides and 3 mm for the back of the bowl in thickness (the back of the bowl is defined as starting from where the string holder is, from the upper back of the bowl where it is attached to the edge of the belly, continuing down to the bottom to the connection point with the neck).

The desire for more volume and bass sound is a recent development. A bigger sound is not part of the standard expectations of the tanbur players in non-concert contexts such as *kalam* sessions or casual settings. In fact, during solo performances of the solo *haqiqi* (“true”/ “sacred”) *nazms*, the sound of the tanbur of a *kalam-khwan* seems almost like a whisper, and it is almost inaudible during the performance of the group *haqiqi nazms*.

In contrast, a bigger sound with more bass meets the current needs of a number of tanbur players including some concert performers. These include individuals who are not *kalam-khwans* or at least not currently active as *kalam-khwans*, and those who usually do not perform the sacred segment of the repertoire. This new need is especially prevalent among musicians influenced by the performance practice of the *Sahna* re-

86. I will use the terms used by the instrument maker himself, i.e., length for the longer diameter (top to base of the belly) and width for the shorter diameter (left to right of the belly) of the pear shaped bowl of the tanbur.

gion,⁸⁷ where enthusiasm for a bigger and deeper tanbur sound is increasing. A bigger sound helps the concert performer increase the volume in performance and manipulate the sound more easily even when using a microphone. In addition, a more elaborate technique resulting from concert performance practice also requires a larger sound to display the more refined and subtle skills of the player, with or without a microphone. The larger sound is also helpful while playing with other instrumentalists or vocalists. In any case, a bigger and deeper sound simply seems to be a more prevalent aesthetic choice for many performers in Iran. Even some AH tanbur students who learn and perform both the sacred and the non-sacred segments of the repertoire are increasingly interested in a bigger and deeper sound. These are usually from the younger generation of tanbur students who have been motivated to follow the practice of concert performers because of their distinctive technique as well as their social and economic status. Ostad Farmani believes in the traditional level of volume, which is “just right, not too big or too soft.”

The shape of the bowls has changed a little since Ostad Hosayn’s time. Ostad Hosayn’s tanbur bowl is about 39 cm long with a width of about 19–20 cm, and depth between 13–14 cm. Normally, older tanburs had a depth of between 10–14 cm, which made them more slippery and ergonomically harder to hold, and a thickness of between 3–4 mm. Current tanburs made by Ostad Farmani have the following approximate measurements for the bowl: length is 36–41 cm (although recently it is closer to 39–41 cm), width is between 16–18 cm, and depth is between 15–18 cm. The width has decreased, while the depth has increased for a better grip that is less slippery during performance. The length follows the older models rather closely, whereas the depth and width of the bowls between Ostad Farmani’s and his predecessors’ tanburs do not correspond exactly.

Another minor change in recent tanbur construction is in the longer neck. A longer neck results in smoother left hand playing technique, a less dry tone, and it produces a more *suznak* sound, i.e., a sound that reaches the heart, “burns” the heart, and brings out the inner anguish or joy. The necks are solid rather than hollow. Although the current necks are longer, eventually their length corresponds to the length of the bowl.

87. The practices of the AH of this region has some differences with the Guran region including in the musical repertoire (see During, *Musiqi va Erfan*, 84 and 87–88).

In very rare cases it is possible to make a neck that is up to 2 cm longer than the length of the bowl. This might be done for increased smoothness of the sound and/or to accommodate additional frets.

Wood, curvature, lacquer. Putting great emphasis on the type of wood, Ostad Farmani first pointed out that the belly and the bowl of the tanbur have to be made from mulberry wood, whereas the neck is usually made from walnut and sometimes, wild forest, pear, apricot, or oak wood. The reason for the use of mulberry wood for the belly and the bowl is that in comparison to other types of wood, some of which may possibly be used for making tanburs (especially for the bowl and the neck), the grain in mulberry wood is naturally filled with hollow points, resulting in a more desirable tone. This may mean a clearer tone rather than a bigger tone. In addition, because of its “softness,” mulberry wood is an easy wood to manipulate, and is, therefore, a better choice for making an instrument that involves delicate work, such as creating a rather thin belly and bowl, drilling holes on the belly, and bending the ribs of wood, for those who make *tarki* tanburs. The best mulberry trees for tanbur construction are those that grow on hilltops and sandy lands.

The woods used for the belly and the bowl must be from two different kinds of mulberry trees, as the resultant sound of this mixture is aesthetically more desirable. It is almost as if a more colorful tone is produced as a result of the conversation between the two contrasting or opposite kinds of woods, whereas using one type of wood for both the belly and the bowl might produce a monotonous and weaker sound. The belly of the instrument, the most important part of the tanbur affecting the quality of sound, has to be made from a crossbred mulberry tree. This is referred to as the “female” tree. The crossbred mulberry is considered to have a better quality of wood because the grain is more open, helping to produce a clearer sound. The bowl is made from what is called the *har-rama* mulberry tree, referred to as the “male” tree. In terms of fruit, it has mulberries, but they are not as good as the mulberries of the crossbred trees. This wood is denser but would produce a rather high-pitched sound, which is one reason it is not used for the belly.

In order for the sound to be produced evenly, the wood chosen for the belly has to be undamaged, and the texture has to be smooth, with straight grooves and no knots. The blocks for the belly are chosen from some of the best trees. This is done before assigning the gathered wood to other parts of the instrument. The block chosen for the belly is set

aside for anywhere from six to seven years, and sometimes even for ten years, in order for the moisture and oil in the wood to dry completely. The remaining natural oil that exists in the wood is then “burned” by fire until it is completely dry.⁸⁸ This is done to let the belly of the instrument breathe, which in turn helps produce a clearer and un-damped sound. Wood sections chosen for the belly may be as thick as about 10 cm, later utilized to produce soundboards for several tanburs. The thickness for each tanbur belly is about 1 cm. Therefore, the larger block of wood, as it is cut for each belly, might be burned by fire, or at least receive a good amount of heating, up to ten times. As a result, the last piece that is cut from the block for a belly would be the best one, since the oil in it would have been burned much more than the first pieces.

The wood for the belly is carved and scraped by hand. In order for the belly to make an ideal sound, it is carved and scraped to anywhere between 1–2 mm in thickness. The thickness of the belly would never exceed 2mm. This also prevents the belly from warping too quickly through time, which could affect the *panja-khor* (literally “the area of the tanbur where the right hand moves”).⁸⁹

Several tiny sound holes are drilled on the belly of the tanbur as final steps for creating the best possible sound (fig. 7). The master makes these holes intuitively. Through generations of experience in the Farmani family, Ostad Farmani knows exactly where the sound is accumulated, and he makes the holes in those areas of the belly. Since the main location of the accumulation of sound is in the neckline of the bowl, two holes are made there to attain the ideal volume and quality of sound. Ostad Farmani also drills several holes close to the middle of the belly. In the past, five holes were made close to the *kharak* (bridge on the belly of the tanbur) in order to indicate the position of the bridge in the case the bridge got broken or misplaced. Apparently those holes did not affect the quality of sound in the best possible way, and thus they were repositioned to the middle of the belly. Holes are normally drilled at an angle, with some exceptions.

88. *Suzanden* i.e., “burning,” in tanbur construction refers to removing the oil from the wood by heating it. Some instrument makers boil the wood; however this is not done for the wood used for the belly. Boiling may be used for the ribs of the bowls of the *tarki* tanburs so that bending would become easier.

89. A “proportionate” *panja-khor* would make the player’s right hand movement effortless.

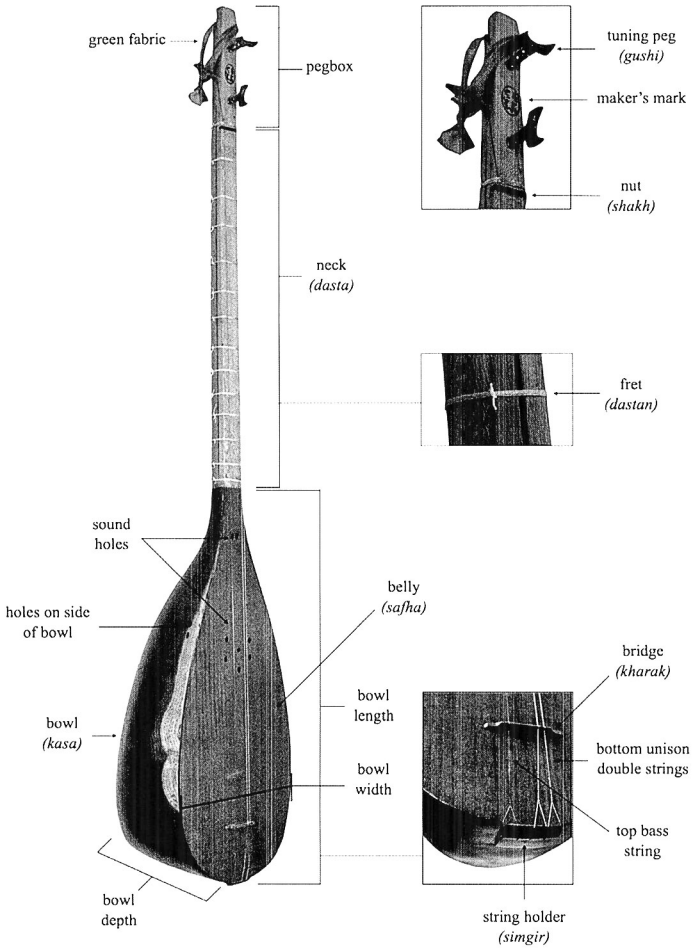


FIGURE 7. Diagram of a tanbur made by Ostad Farmani. Diagram by Max Hembd.

One or two holes are also made on the side of the bowl. A clear answer was not given by Ostad Farmani about this, and it seemed as if it did not have a clear function for him. Perhaps in the past those holes might have been used for blowing out any residue after drilling the holes in the manner of setar construction, but the master pointed out that he was especially careful not to let any dust or ash enter the bowl, and therefore he did not use them in that way. These holes do not seem to affect the sound.

The belly is curved a little so that in the long term it does not warp too much. The expression used for this technique is *gorda-mahi*, literally “the back of the fish,” referring to the convex curvature. In the old times, this technique was not utilized in tanbur construction. For this reason, some tanbur soundboards would sink over time. However, some masters used a brace underneath the belly to protect against this outcome. The belly of Ostad Hosayn’s tanbur has not sunk because of the presence of this kind of brace.

A newly-made bowl has to be hung to dry naturally, rather than by using a machine of some kind. Several of these “raw” looking bowls that were still wet and not ready to be worked on were hung on the wall. These were dear to Ostad Farmani because he foresaw their future as completed tanburs.

The wood used for the neck is usually chosen from old house doors that are at least fifty years old, and therefore rarely get curved. Other kinds of wood used for the neck are kept in the workshop for about ten to fifteen years, in order to prevent it from curving once it is used in the construction of the instrument. Black walnut wood from the region is also used for the neck. As with the wood used for the belly, if the wood used for the neck is “live,” it is burned to clear out the oil. Depending on the wood used, the neck is also rounded just a little. This is because of the natural wear and tear that will occur with playing. The neck could eventually sink inward and affect the exact position of frets in proportion to the length of the strings if it is not rounded. A special level is used to make sure that the belly and the neck have the right amount of curvature. The master believes a precise leveling might be one of the most important aspects in tanbur construction.

Lacquer, as opposed to paint or oil, is used on the instrument because it does not soak into the grain of the wood that is so important in creating a good sound. The lacquer is so light that even twenty layers of it

would not create a 1mm thickness on the belly of the tanbur. The belly is given about twenty coats of lacquer, which is not considered much, but the surface of the bowl is coated as much as possible, since it does not have as heavy a role in sound production. The neck is also coated about twenty times.

Bridges and pegs: Wood and buffalo horn. The string holder where the strings are fastened on the back of the bowl (*simgir* or *shakh*) and the nut close to the pegs at the top of the neck (also called *shakh*) are made from buffalo horn or, rarely, from other sturdy types of horn, like goat horn. Even though simplicity seems to be valued, the string holder (*simgir*) in at least one of the older tanburs at which we looked was meticulously lacquered so that it looked as if it belonged to the body of the bowl.

The bridge (*kharak*) on the belly of the instrument is usually made with oak, a similar wood called mazgar, or apricot. Walnut and boxwood also may be used. In the past, it was usually made from plane-tree, walnut, and very rarely from horn. In the opinion of Ostad Farmani, the *kharak* plays an extremely important role in the final quality of the sound. It should not be too soft or too hard. Importantly, the *kharaks* in the tanbur always have been glued to the belly, unlike setar *kharaks*.⁹⁰

The pegs were formerly made with walnut, although special orders were sometimes made with buffalo horn. Ostad Changiz (Ostad Farmani's grandfather) would also sometimes make pegs and even the bridge of the top of the belly of the tanbur with horn. In fact, the pegs on Ostad Changiz's tanbur that was present at the workshop were made with Buffalo horn, looking peculiarly fragile and small.

Even though the nut close to the pegs as well as the string holder are still made from buffalo horn, Ostad Farmani believes walnut wood is preferable for making pegs at this time. For one thing, buffalo horn is difficult to find, and it also makes the production of the pegs more cumbersome. Additionally, though they are sturdier, pegs made with horn are more likely to slip, partly because of the smoothness but much more because they will not compress. This could cause the strings to go out of tune more often. Walnut wood is softer, and therefore, pegs made with it stay in one position for a longer period.

90. In order not to dampen the sound in any way, *setar kharaks* are normally not glued to the belly.

Glues. In the past, *sirishum* was used for adhering parts; this glue is a mixture of animal and plant products. Modern glues are presently used.

Frets and strings. The term *dastan* is mentioned frequently in old treatises on music as well as in Persian classical poetry and prose. It usually refers to frets of an instrument or to the frets designating a particular mode or piece.⁹¹ The term *parda*, also found in early works, is used mostly in reference to a particular mode or piece rather than to the frets in these sources.⁹² The word *dastan* is traditionally used for the frets of the tanbur, while *parda* is the word commonly and currently used for the frets of the instruments of Iranian classical music. Frets are tied on rather than fixed in place. Traditionally, thirteen frets are used for the tanbur. Some tanbur players use fourteen frets, which is a more recent development.⁹³ Faithful to the tradition, Ostad Farmani feels strongly about the older two-string thirteen-fret tanburs, in comparison to the current ones with three strings (rarely four strings) and fourteen frets. The older generations seem to have had the same devotion to tradition. For example, Ostad Changiz's tanbur has thirteen frets and two strings, even though it was made later and slightly longer than Ostad Hosayn's tanbur. In the Guran region, the tanburs used to have two strings. The three-stringed tanbur with a double unison course on the bottom and one bass string on the top became prevalent first in the Sahna region about forty years ago and then in the Guran region.

For his frets, Ostad Farmani uses strands made from the intestine of sheep, usually sacrificed sheep of *nazr* or sheep intestine bought from slaughterhouses, rather than the surgical strands that are recently sometimes used for the frets of other stringed instruments.⁹⁴ He believes the surgical threads are "plastic like" and do not create the resonance that is produced by using sheep gut. Even though in the last three or four years they have sometimes purchased frets from outside sources, Ostad Farmani's family has maintained the tradition of making their own frets. According to the master, because their frets are twisted well in the process, the texture is more uniform and, therefore, sturdier. These frets

91. Mahdi Setayeshgar, *Vazhe-name-ye Musiqi-ye Iran-zamin*, 2 vols., 1st ed. (Tehran: Ettela'at, 1995/96 [1374 HS]), vol. 1 439–445.

92. *Ibid.*, 183–192.

93. No particular symbolism is attached to the frets in the Guran region, although the *nazms* of the musical repertoire have devotional associations.

94. "Catgut."

also seem to create a more beautiful timbre as a result of a watchful process of making. Ostad Farmani wraps the thread three times around the neck for all the frets. He starts with thinner ones from the bottom of the tanbur (on the bowl side) up to fret number seven. Thereafter, he uses thicker frets. Some other tanbur makers use a combination of three and four rolls. The fret that is tied behind the nut at the top of the neck (close to the pegs) has always been used to reinforce the position of this nut, which determines the final sounding length of the strings on the neck.

Historically, silk, twisted gut, and silver threads were used for the tanbur strings.⁹⁵ Currently, steel or similar metal alloys and copper and brass are used;⁹⁶ respectively, they are referred to as the “white” and the “yellow” strings. According to Naser Shirazi, an instrument maker in California, the yellow strings are made with phosphor bronze.⁹⁷ The older two-string tanburs used only white strings. Even the three-string tanburs had all white strings until about fifteen years ago, when the yellow type started being used for the top bass string. The usage of the yellow string, borrowed from Iranian classical music and especially the yellow strings in setar has been because of the recent practice of concert performance on the tanbur and the needs of concert performers to have a sound they believe is more attractive to general audiences. The combination of white and yellow strings would simply create more contrast in timbre and possibly works better with the performance of pieces that utilize both the tanbur music and Iranian classical music. Ostad Farmani uses string numbers sixteen to eighteen (0.16–0.18 mm—extremely fine strings) for the bottom double white strings and number twenty (0.20 mm) for the top bass yellow string.

Ornamentation in construction. Although a tanbur would certainly be appreciated more when it is made with utter care and precision, ornamentation on the body of the tanbur is not part of the tradition of tanbur making. Analogous to this is the idea of simplicity as an important characteristic of chanting. As opposed to the vocal styles of Iranian classical music, the *nazms* of the AH are to be sung without embellishment, which is not considered to be the “correct” way of singing.⁹⁸

95. Ali-Nezhad, *Tanbur: Az Dirbaz ta Konun*, 132.

96. *Ibid.*, 257.

97. Naser Shirazi, personal communication with author (Walnut Creek, 2004).

98. This quality is re-enforced through teaching as well as critical comments people make in listening to the recordings or live performances of the *nazms*.

Solo performance and the tanbur. Solo playing has always been customary and valued among the few master tanbur players of each period. An excellent surviving example to demonstrate this is the account of the grading sessions held by A Sayyid Shams al-Din (the previous Pir). As a great tanbur player himself, periodically he would evaluate the tanbur players by asking them to gather in the *takya*⁹⁹ and play one by one. Then he would grade them accordingly and comment on their performances. By the end of the session, those who had done the worst job would sit at the end of the line. He would then tell the *kalam-khwans* and the tanbur players to come back the next time with a better knowledge of the *nazms* that they did not perform so well. In this way, the Pir of the time would encourage more practice and a healthy competition in the solo presentation of the *nazms*, which would eventually result in an active preservation of the performance practice of the vocal and instrumental renditions of the *nazms*.

There seems to be increased enthusiasm in the Guran region for becoming a solo performer in the larger community as well. This is likely for the following reasons: 1) the emphasis put on preserving the various aspects of religion by the current Pir, 2) more active participation in the tanbur classes, and perhaps 3) looking up to formal performances of the *kalam-khwans* of the region as well as concert performers in local and international cultural events and festivals, both of whom have created a new image of tanbur as a symbol of self-expression and a means to receive social admiration and respect.

Corresponding to the recurring theme in our conversation, when the subject of solo performers was brought up, Ostad Farmani quickly shifted the conversation to draw my attention to the importance of sound, and therefore, to the structure of the tanbur that is played in a solo performance rather than to the skill of the player. He believed that the most important factor in playing well is the good sound of a tanbur, which creates not only a beautiful tone independent of the player but also psychologically helps the player to perform better. In addition to the sound, the proportionate *panja-khor*¹⁰⁰ of a tanbur also helps the player to perform more easily on the instrument. He acknowledged that the

99. Normally used to refer to a place of spiritual pilgrimage or gathering for Sufis. In the case of the Khamushi and Yadegari Families of the AH it refers to the residence of A Sayyid Beraka Haydari. This residence and the village of Tutshami where it is located are considered sacred.

100. See note 89.

skillfulness of the master player is very important in a good solo performance, but it is never as important as the inherent character of the tanbur itself.

Presenting the tanbur to the patron. Eventually, the tanburs will be given to the patrons in the order in which they were requested. However, Ostad Farmani indicated that after completion, the instrument would be kept in the workshop for at least ten to fifteen days to make sure it had the ideal sound and to check for any problems in the construction, such as any warping on the neck or the belly. He indicated that although a better quality of wood with fewer knots may be used in some tanburs, all have to produce the same quality of sound in the end. If he found the sound of a tanbur unsatisfactory, Ostad Farmani would be extremely disheartened and would work on the instrument until he fixed the problem, but he will never break a tanbur. Because it is a sacred instrument, it can never be broken. Ostad Farmani was uncomfortable talking about the disbursement for his tanburs, as it is considered inappropriate in Kurdish culture to talk about or ask for compensation directly. Finally, he said he would accept anything that people were pleased to give him.

Repair. Several worn looking tanburs were also hanging on the wall in Ostad Farmani's workshop. These were the tanburs brought to the Ostad for repair. People bring tanburs to him by any tanbur maker from all over Iran and overseas. Because he feels a responsibility to be courteous to all, every so often he becomes so engaged with repairing that he cannot make even thirty new tanburs per year. What pleases him however, is that in the end, the repaired tanburs turn into excellent instruments with perfect soundboards, necks, bowls, and most importantly, improved sounds.

Other tanbur makers, and ribbed tanburs. Presently, there are a multitude of young and talented tanbur makers in the Guran region and all over the country. However, aside from Ostad Farmani and his family, some of the best known tanbur makers of the Guran region and beyond include Ostad Amir Amirian, Ostad Haji Chaqaburi, Sayyid Yar-Morad Faraji, Ostad Abd-Allah Fathi, Ostad Adel Kamali, Ostad Faraydun Kamali, Ostad Qader Manhu'i, Ostad Zaman Moradi, Ostad Qobad Qobadi, Ostad Baba-Morad Qolami, Ostad Kaki Gol-Morad Shafi'i,

Ostad Taher Yar-Waysi, and Ostad Aziz-Morad Zare'i.¹⁰¹ In the Sahna region there are also many excellent tanbur makers, the most famous of whom is Ostad Abd al-Reza Rahnama, who usually makes ribbed tanburs.¹⁰²

Ostad Farmani explained that ribbed tanburs, more prevalent outside Guran, waste less wood, whereas the whole-bowl tanburs require a lot of wood and longer work time. But he repeated that because the ribs are boiled, they lose their strength and character and become somewhat “pasty” and, therefore, do not improve over time. Ostad Farmani himself has experimented with ribbed tanburs and believes the ribbed tanburs with a “heel” (*pashna*)¹⁰³ connecting the ribs of the bowl to the neck are sturdier than the ones that lack a heel. The most famous maker of ribbed tanburs in Ostad Farmani’s mind was Ostad Nariman who used to work and live in Tehran.

The sound. As if to illuminate what pulled all of our discussion together, Ostad Farmani stressed that the construction itself was not as important as the quality of sound that finally comes out of the instrument. “All these efforts are for the ultimate goal of creating a beautiful and *suznak* sounding tanbur that would be appreciated and loved by the jovial heart of the sensitive tanbur players such as Ostad Taher and others like him,” he said. By saying the construction was not as important, he was being humble, minimizing the value of his efforts to emphasize the final hope for the instrumentalist’s approval of the good sound. Most importantly, however, he was stressing the fundamental issue in constructing a tanbur: the priority of sound over everything.

101. Thanks to Sayyid Abbas Daman-Afshan and Ostad Taher Yar-Wayyi for helping to collect the names of the tanbur makers of Guran.

102. In the Sahna region, Ali-Nezhad lists Ostad Khodawerdi, Ostad Hosayn-Ali Jamali, the Marjani family, and Abd al-Reza Rahnama. However, he believes Ostad Nariman, who does not belong to the two general regions of Sahna and Guran to be above all. He has discussed the Farmani family of the Guran region as well, indicating their excellence and uniqueness in tanbur construction. (Ali-Nezhad, *Tanbur: Az Dirbaz ta Konun*, 270–71). As with the Guran region, currently there are many new excellent and talented tanbur makers in the Sahna region.

103. Literally “heel.” This heel is used to strengthen the connection point of the neck and the bowl in a ribbed tanbur.

The workshop, work etiquette, social status, gift from the Divine. Little has changed in the nature of the family workshop and the masters' work etiquette. The current workshop, where Ostad Changiz also used to work, is about eighty or ninety years old, though it has been renovated. Before that, Ostad Farmani's ancestors worked at their residence, adjacent to the present workshop. Their family residence goes back to the time of Ostad Hosayn and his father. Ostad Farmani enthusiastically works almost every day from about eight in the morning to noon or one o'clock in the afternoon, and then from about two to about six in the evening. He intends to keep the workshop a family affair. He has two sons, both of whom are excellent tanbur players and actively observe their father's work. He has three brothers, also excellent tanbur players, who help him at the workshop (fig. 8). Ostad Farmani is not keen to create a larger workshop and hire help to make and sell more instruments. He strongly believes that doing so would turn the tanbur into a commodity, and thus it would seriously harm its spiritual status and what it represents. He likes to make tanburs that are based on the older models in terms of construction and spiritual value, even if it means making only twenty tanburs in one year, which is a very small number.

Individuals who sang the *nazms* beautifully, played the tanbur masterfully, or made good tanburs had been told that they had received a gift from Dawud of the Haftan. So I asked Ostad Farmani: "Is this gift of tanbur making given to you by Dawud?" He responded, only repeating the Pir's name, revering him as a sacred entity. Even in expressing gratitude to the blessings of the Pir's family, he uttered the Pir's name to refer to the whole family. He believed that he was only a tool and that *Aqa* was the main factor in his instrument making. At that moment it could clearly be seen that the indescribable special quality of the tanburs made by Ostad Farmani was essentially due to his selfless and intense belief in the AH religion. He wished to hold up the tanbur, where it belonged; he did not wish the story of his tanburs to be told as his personal story.

Making music on the tanbur. The smallest interval used in the tanbur music is a semitone, as opposed to the surrounding musical practices in which a quartertone (or close to a quartertone) is the smallest possible interval. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that intonations based on slightly smaller than semitones were found in a rare private recording from the Guran region.¹⁰⁴ The pitches on the tanbur are specified by

104. Also see Darvishi, "Tanbur: Kermanshahan," 316–31, for a detailed analysis of the intonation of the tanburs from various regions and periods.



FIGURE 8. Ostad Farmani with his father and brothers in his workshop.

fret numbers rather than pitch names. The range of a normal tanbur is about an octave and a half, but only about one octave is utilized regularly. The bass string is used as a drone and very rarely for playing concluding phrases or passages in a *nazm*.

There are two main kinds of tunings for the tanbur.¹⁰⁵ The bass string is tuned either a fourth or a fifth below the bottom unison double strings. The first tuning is called *kuk-e haft* (“the ‘seven’ tuning”), with the bass string tuned a fourth below the bottom unison double strings, and the second is called *kuk-e panj* (“the ‘five’ tuning”), with the bass string tuned a fifth below the bottom unison double strings.¹⁰⁶ The seven tuning and the five tuning refer respectively to an octave created by playing the seventh fret and the fifth fret of the unison double strings and the top bass string. It is commonly agreed that the sacred portion of the repertoire is supposed to be played with the seven tuning, although

105. See Darvishi “Tanbur: Kermanshahan,” 313–16, for discussion of other tuning systems in other regions.

106. Kaka-Berar Ostad, personal communication with author (Kermanshah 2000–Present).

the five tuning is also sometimes used.¹⁰⁷ There is no concept of a fixed pitch in AH music, and it is difficult to specify an approximate range.

With the exception of concert performers, who must follow the general etiquette of finely tuned instruments in performance, at the present time, fine-tuning of the tanbur is not greatly valued, even though all the respected *kalam-khwans* of the region seem to possess excellent musical ears. There are two possible reasons for this. First, in large processions or seated chanting circles, the quiet tanbur is hardly heard, and sometimes it is not even sounded. In cases when the tanbur is not sounded, the melodic movement and the frets that correspond to the particular *nazm* are referred to and touched with the left hand. This is, perhaps, to remind the *kalam-khwan* of the particular *nazm* or to indicate an active participation of the tanbur. Interestingly, one *kalam-khwan* said he could not sing a *nazm* without touching the corresponding frets of the tanbur. Second, even if the circle of chanting is small, in order to be attentive to the vocal range of the individuals in the group as a whole and to maintain the flow of the chanting session from one *nazm* to another, it is not possible for the *kalam-khwan* to adjust his voice with the tanbur for each succeeding *nazm*.

The main playing techniques of the right hand are the *shorr* and the down and up strokes. The *shorr* uses four or all five fingers of the right hand to pluck the strings softly one by one in a constant speed, creating a unified movement and a tremolo-like effect. Some play faster *shorrs* and some use deliberately slower *shorrs*, which might be connected to older performance practices. The basic down and up strokes normally use the index finger (or all fingers) of the right hand to go back and forth on the strings, with the choice of varying dynamics. In addition, numerous patterns and combinations of the *shorr* and the down and up strokes, as well as other refined finger work, both by the right and the left hands, are used by the instrumentalists of various regions as special ornamentations and variations. These ornamentations are sometimes part of the prescribed performance practice of particular *nazms*.¹⁰⁸

107. Sayyid Khayal Yadegari, personal communication with author (Simani 2000–Present).

108. See Darvishi, “Tanbur: Kermanshahan,” 331–34, for a detailed listing of his findings on the tanbur’s various playing techniques based on his work with the instrumentalists of various regions.

Sacred Presence: Silent and Sounded

Baba Khwashin, one of the incarnations of the “divine king,” promises his companions that he will return as Baba Nawus in the succeeding cycle, and he designates the sound of the tanbur as the indication of Baba Nawus’s presence. In Baba Nawus’s cycle, the tanbur makes the hearts of the divine companions glow with the good news of Khawandkar’s presence.¹⁰⁹ The tanbur and the sacred music that is played and sung with it is so revered that the Pir once uttered to the *kalam-khwans* of the region, “...if a gathering is not worthy of *kalam*, kiss your tanbur and put it aside.”¹¹⁰

Silent or sounded, the tanbur is regarded as a powerful presence. In its silence, the tanbur purifies and heals. Ostad Taher remembers that illnesses were cured by heating the neck of the tanbur and holding it to the ailing parts of the body of the individual. He has observed such incidents himself. Alas, he believes, these miracles belong to the times when people had an unbroken faith in their religion.¹¹¹ It is kissed (*ziyarat*),¹¹² sometimes twice, as a sign of absolute deference. It has the sacred *nazms* hidden in its heart, and potentially has the ability to cry out and invite the presence of Sultan in *Jam*.

An interesting case of the tanbur’s silent presence is during the performance of the vocal cycles of the solo *nazms*. While the performer sings, the tanbur is sometimes held silently for a few moments, with the right hand of the tanbur player extended. It is possible that this gesture may partially signify the telling of a story and communicating with an audience.¹¹³ Nevertheless, the listeners, responding to the spiritual pleasure created by the sung words, also extend their right hand at the

109. See Ostad-Taher Yar-Waysi and Sayyid-Abbas Daman-Afshan, *Daftar-e Nasr-e Din* [The Book of Service to the Religion], (Gahwara, Iran, unpublished), 19. Also see Unknown Author (sacred text), *Daftar-e Diwan-e Gawra*, 31.

110. Ostad, personal communication with author.

111. Yar-Waysi, personal communication with author.

112. Literally “to visit/see an important individual” or “to visit a sacred place.” This expression is also used among various spiritual seekers, to mean the kissing of something that is considered sacred or precious, in order to show deference and to receive its spiritual benefits. In the AH tradition, this may be connected to a tangible or intangible item or concept.

113. Evidence of the hand upturned position indicating a singer is seen as a recurring gesture in Mughal miniature paintings. See Bonnie C. Wade, *Imaging Sound: An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art, and Culture in Mughal India* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 195.

moment they feel spiritually lifted during a performance. In observations of a variety of performers, it seems that the extending of the right hand might be more related to past performance practices rather than those of the present time. Even when the hand is not extended, some *kalam-khwans* stop sounding the tanbur during the singing. The father of my tanbur teacher, a source of memory for past practices, once asked his son to “stop” the tanbur while singing, because he pointed that the tanbur must wait for the words to be heard.

An instance of the semi-silent but necessary presence of the tanbur is during group chanting session, when normally only one tanbur is played. The tanbur by nature is an extremely quiet instrument. This means that it can hardly be heard during the chanting of the group. In large walking processions, more than one tanbur may be used, but normally no more than two. In these processions, the tanbur is sometimes not even sounded.

In contrast, instrumental passages or sections that are not sung or do not have a vocal rendition are special moments where the sound of the tanbur is heard exclusively. Virtuosity may also be shown off in these instances. The moments when the sound of the tanbur is heard by itself may be thought of as communicating the tanbur’s powerful presence in a unique way: although it is a quiet instrument and is hardly heard during group chanting, in those rare occasions when it speaks, everything else must be silent.

Sometimes in a casual setting, only the instrumental renditions of the *nazms* might be performed. This is another manner in which the tanbur is heard entirely on its own. Interestingly, during purely instrumental performances of a *nazm*, the vocal rendition is always present in the mind of the tanbur player, albeit silently.

Sacralization. In light of the extent and meaning of the sacredness of the tanbur, one wonders whether the mulberry tree is considered sacred in the AH religion.¹¹⁴ As far as the people present at the interview knew, there were no references in their collective memory about oral sources that told about the sacredness of the mulberry tree, nor do references to the sacredness of the mulberry tree seem to be present in the

114. During asserts that the mulberry tree is the tree of Benjamin and the two strings represent Pir Musi and Dawud of the Haftan (During, *Musiqi va Erfan*, 67). However, I did not find this belief among the tanbur makers, *kalam-khwans*, or *daftar-khwans* of the Guran region.

body of the poems. Nevertheless, the tanbur begins the journey towards becoming sacred the moment the wood is selected for making a tanbur.¹¹⁵ It was fascinating how a few pieces of wood and intestinal thread and strings gradually or immediately would undergo a process of sacralization. Yet it seemed that the point when the tanbur truly and completely became a sacred entity was when the instrument was finished.

This process by which a simple piece of wood becomes sacred is similar to fruit, nuts, candy, a head of sugar, or sheep or rooster, becoming sacred after being chosen for the AH vows and blessed by the Sayyid in the ritual of the blessing of the food, *Jam*, through specific invocations. However, there is no known blessing prayer for the tanbur. Sacredness is inherently present in the idea of the tanbur. The process of constructing a tanbur itself seems to work as a blessing prayer by the maker, who does not have to be a Sayyid. Once its construction is finished, the tanbur is kissed, and the powerful phrase “my beginning and end are the divine friend, Yar” (*Awwal Akherem Yar*) is uttered. This phrase indicates either the awareness of the presence or invoking the presence of the Haftan, or of the ultimate divine friend, Sultan. The books of the sacred poems are perhaps a good analogy for this process of sacralization, in that blank leaves of paper suddenly become sanctified once the poems are written or photocopied onto them. Whenever approached thereafter, the transformed blank notebook is kissed and revered.

Decoration and the sacred. To decorate the tanbur with outward expressions of the sacred, a special green fabric (fig. 7) is normally used to hang the tanbur on the wall. A special hole is made for this purpose in the pegbox. Customarily, this cloth is given to individuals as a blessed souvenir from important AH pilgrimage sites or as a blessed token by the Pir. Although in the AH religion colors symbolize different entities and are always important in some way, green is the color that is most significant and most loved by the AH, symbolizing Baba Yadegar of

115. The notion of sacralization may be seen in the AH people's daily life. For example, the money chosen for *niyaz* or *nazr*, and even the envelope used for it, is kissed and regarded as sacred the moment it is put aside for these sacred rituals. Another example, among many, that I was able to observe, was the treatment of the metal door to the new house to be inhabited by the Pir. In my visit to this house, with my tanbur teacher Kaka-Berar Ostad, he immediately kissed the metal door, pointing out that the house was now considered the residence of the Pir and therefore everything, including the door, was sacred.

the Haftan, who is believed to be the essence of Sultan. Numerous references are made to “the one who wears green” as well as “the green tree branch” in the sacred poems, hinting at the color with which Baba Yadegar is associated.

The Pirs and the tanbur. A Sayyid Beraka and A Sayyid Rostam, two of the former Pirs of Guran, both played the tanbur and composed two *nazms* that are cherished within the repertoire of Guran. A Sayyid Shams al-Din, the previous Pir also played the tanbur (his grading sessions were discussed earlier in this article). A Sayyid Nasr al-Din, the current Pir, also had learned to play the tanbur as a child, but for various reasons he did not continue to play. Nevertheless, he knows the *nazms* of the AH extremely well and has a gift for appreciating music from all over the world. He seems to be one of the best judges of the *kalam-khwans*' skill at the vocal and the tanbur rendition of the *nazms*. Following on the same path as A Sayyid Shams al-Din's tradition of evaluating the performance of *kalam-khwans* and the tanbur players of the region, and possessing the same scrutinizing ear, A Sayyid Nasr al-Din has also helped to maintain a high standard of playing and singing of the *nazms*, through his unique efforts.

Maintaining the tanbur's purity. The physical shape, construction, and the repertoire¹¹⁶ that is played on the tanbur are fixed, with little endorsement for change. This is done to maintain its purity. Even though Ostad Farmani believes that about eighty percent of all the non-sacred music played on the tanbur is somehow based on the sacred music of the AH, and he does not disregard it, he is of the opinion that true tanbur music is the finite tanbur repertoire that has been transmitted through generations. He does not so much mind *erfani* (mystical) music being played on the tanbur, but he does disapprove of light songs. Further, the Pir does not approve of playing non-AH music on the tanbur. However, he acts courteously towards those who have experimented with extra strings, composition, or improvisation on the tanbur.

For the AH, the tanbur is an instrument used for devotional purposes and is considered sacred. In all devotional practices around the globe, there are customs, rituals, even particular body gestures that are thought

116. For information on the sacred repertoire please see Hooshmandrad, *Performing the Belief*.

to help realize specific spiritual results. Occasionally, even minute changes are thought to divert the effect. Clearly, no one can be certain of these convictions. Change is inevitable and interesting and, in numerous instances, positive. However, as a teacher once said, "some traditions are simply worth preserving." Perhaps one must ponder seriously whether the AH tradition should be preserved, as the AH people wish it to be, before it is lost in the sea of our ever-changing, modern world.