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The Healing Power of Music and Chants amongst The Ahl-E Haqq People

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THE HEALING POWER OF MUSIC AND CHANTS AMONGST THE AHL-E HAQQ
PEOPLE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Azadeh Vatanpour


May 2017

THE HEALING POWER OF MUSIC AND CHANTS AMONGST THE AHL-E HAQQ
PEOPLE


Date Recommended 14 April 2017



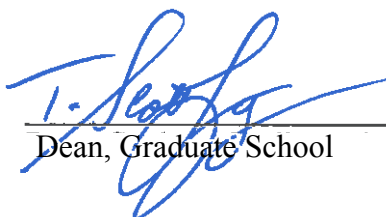
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Dean, Graduate School

4/24/17
Date

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Rashid, and my daughter Armina, for their constant love, encouragement, and support during the challenges of graduate school and life

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This thesis examines current practices of music and prayers in the context of *Jam* ritual among the Ahl-e Haqq, a vernacular religion group in Iranian Kurdistan. I examine the construction and sacralization of the sacred instrument of the Ahl-e Haqq, *tanbūr*. I also explore the sacred prayer, *kalām*, and the association of prayer and music. Through the ethnographic method, participant observations, and interviewing religious figures and master musicians during the fieldwork in Sahneh, Iran, I investigate the relation of the Ahl-e Haqq prayers and music, and their effect on healing during their sacred ritual performance. Drawing primarily on scholarship from David Hufford and Bonnie Blair O'Connor, I theorize to show the distinction between healing and cure. Also using Leonard Primiano's concept of vernacular religion, my aim is to show how the Ahl-e Haqq define their vernacular health belief system. This thesis examines the effect of music and prayers on healing in particular contexts and how it influences the daily well-being.

Introduction

Someone asked, "What is loverhood?"

I replied, "Don't ask me about these meanings, When you become like me, you'll know;

When it calls you, you'll tell its tale" ~ Rumi

Several years ago when I became interested in Iranian spiritual music and decided to explore and learn more about it, I started taking classes in *daf*¹ (large Persian frame drum). During one of our group classes, three *tanbūr* players joined our session, and as they began playing, the beautiful heavenly sound of *tanbūr* took complete control of my soul and mind and induced an incredible calmness and peace of mind which I had not experienced before. It was a while before I realized and grasped the association and the link between this instrument and the Ahl-e Haqq religious group. It was then that I became curious and eager to know more about this group and their sacred music. Eventually, I got to know some of the Ahl-e Haqq people in Shiraz² and Tehran³ who could better explain and shed light on their religious principles and practices associated with them.

After acquiring and gaining information about the Ahl-e Haqq religion, its worldview, practices, and sacred music in the course of several years from both insiders and outsiders, I had yet to have a chance to observe these rituals and ceremonies in their natural surroundings and regions. I also was waiting for an opportunity to examine the relation between music and the ebullience which I experienced after every session of listening to *tanbūr*. It became imperative to find out more about the inner connection between their music and mental healing which is believed to lead to better physical health. Because of the secretive nature of their religion and sensitivities associated with

it, I needed the elder's permission to study their religion and record my findings.

Therefore, in the summer of 2015, I traveled to Tehran to meet Mr. Armān Dakeī, who is from the *Sādāt* family of Ahl-e Haqq, where he agreed to become my guide during my journey to Sahneh, Kermānshāh.

I felt blessed that they had accepted me in their community and trusted me enough to provide answers and information despite all the discouragement and negative input I had received from several scholars and individuals concerning Ahl-e Haqq people's unwillingness to trust outsiders about their religion. During my month-long stay there, I received blessings and encouragement from a *Pīr*⁴ and other individuals about my quest, which empowered me to confront and overcome hardships and difficulties on this research. This thesis is but a small part of what was observed and learned from Ahl-e Haqq people.

To better examine the healing perception of Ahl-e Haqq, I will begin with introducing the Ahl-e Haqq's religion and world-view. Then I will explain this research project, methodology, and primary and secondary sources.

Ahl-e Haqq Religion and Worldview

The Ahl-e-Haqq faith originally spawned and flourished in Western Iran and North Eastern Iraq, and has now spread to many parts of the world (Iranica 2011). According to on Ahl-e Haqq belief, *Shāh Khushīn*, the physical manifestation of God on earth born of a virgin mother, started teaching and spreading his beliefs among the *Lur*⁵ tribes during the eleventh century. By the thirteenth century, they had spread to the Kurdish areas of Iran and Iraq. Nowadays, Ahl-e Haqq, which literarily means "The

people of Truth,” mainly live in Kermānshāh, Iran, and followers of this mystical religion are mostly Kurds although they do have a few *Azerī*⁶, *Fārs*⁷, and *Lur* followers as well. They also refer to themselves as *Yārsān*, translated as “the Friend of *Sūltān* (the [Divine] King).”

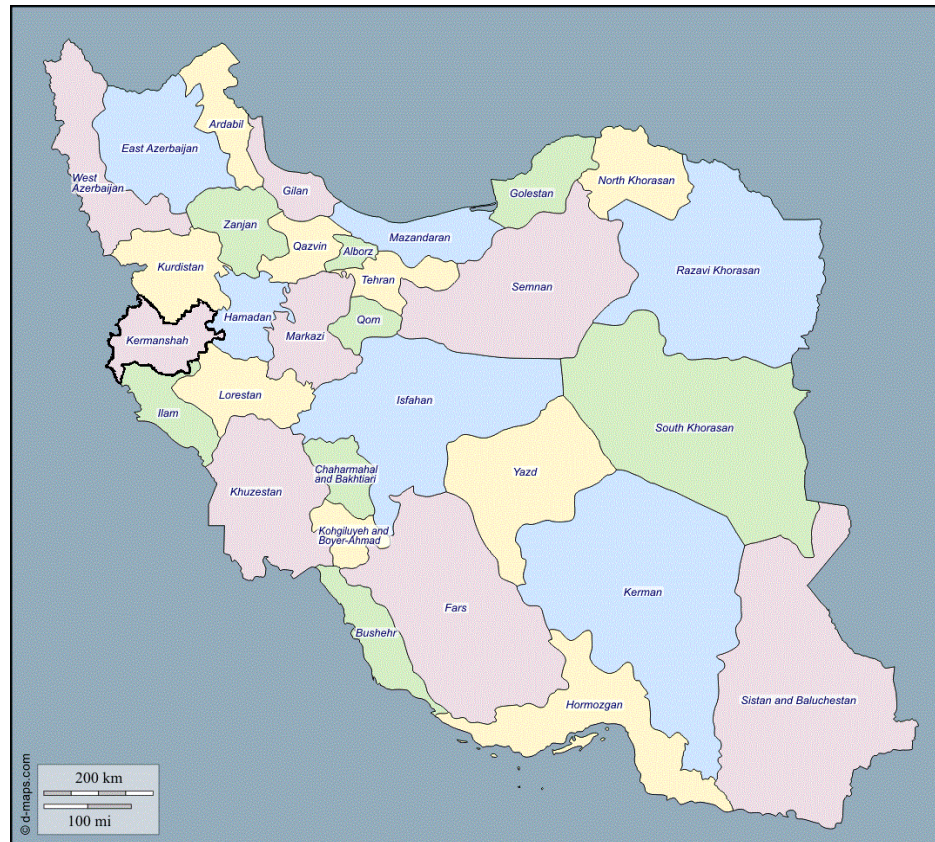


Figure 1: Iran map with the province of Kermanshah marked. http://www.d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=105858&lang=en

There are no official statistics about the global Ahl-e Haqq population or even their population in Kermānshāh. The fact that they are not recognized officially as a religion in Iran could be the main reason why there is no official number of Ahl-e Haqq members, as they are considered and counted as Muslim and not a minority religious group. According to some estimates, their number is around two to three million

followers; however, the sources of these estimates are not clear, and they might be based on information that Ahl-e Haqq themselves have provided (Hooshmandrad 2004:10).

The present day structure of the Ahl-e-Haqq religion was established in the fourteenth century by *Sultan Sahāk*, an individual highly revered by the Ahl-e Haqq people (During 1999:8). They are most commonly viewed as one of the Sufi groups that formed after the establishment of Islam. Sūfism is an inner, esoteric, and mystical practice of Islam which is based on “illuminative wisdom and the realization of the oneness of God, a realization that is not possible without love” (Nasr and Jahanbegloo 2010:277). Sufism is a movement that seems to have arisen as a reaction against orthodox Islam and its theological principles. Sufis insist on the purity of the heart and “moral cleanliness of the motivation of action” (Rahman 6:1998). Sufis’ ultimate goal is to unify with God and find eternal love. According to Sufi belief, mysticism is a process of refinement of the senses and will. Mysticism is the dissolution of personal will into that of God, where resistance against worldly passions and desires is emphasized. One can achieve this ultimate reality through different means such as art, music, *samā*, religious ceremonies, chanting and worship. Sufism is not a new idea in Islam, as ascetics and people of piety have existed since its inception. Throughout their histories, Sufis and *Moteshar’ehīn* (individuals who abide by the *sharī’at*⁸ or “law”) have always disagreed and argued about their faiths. At times, Shia religious scholars have excommunicated the Sufis, rendering them heretics. Sufis describe themselves as the people of truth, consciousness, and creed, and consider the followers of the official religion to be people of the facade, customs, and *sharī’at*. Sufis value truthfulness above *sharī’at*; therefore,

they prescribe routine rituals of physical purification and daily prayers for religious people.

Although the main idea of Sufism is visible in Ahl-e Haqq beliefs, they do not view themselves as a branch of *tasawwuf* (Sufism), but rather consider Sufism a branch of their beliefs (During 1999:119). This notion comes from the belief that Ahl-e Haqqism is a religion in itself and not a sect of Shia.

Some scholars consider the Ahl-e-Haqq to be a branch of Shia which has blended with pre-Islamic beliefs and Iranian religions, taking different forms throughout time (Jeyhoun Abadi 1982:3). The Ahl-e Haqq, however, believe that it is a continuation of deep religious feelings that has reached them from heart to heart, which in itself is the continuation of the principles that Alī ibn abī Tāleb⁹ had taught his closest companions. The Iranian historian Rashid Yasemi, who has carried out many studies in the Kurdish areas, believes that Ahl-e-Haqq was a provisional religion that had been influenced by both older religions such as Manichaeism and Christianity, and newer ones such as Islam (Yasemi 129). In his opinion, the main root of this religion lies in Zoroastrianism. Saddiq Safi Zadeh, another researcher on Ahl-e-Haqq religion, believes that resistant movements against Arab invaders were the cause behind the establishment of this faith (Safi Zadeh 1997:63). My observations conform most closely to those of Jean During, who notes: “Ahl-e Haqqism can be seen neither as a syncretism of Islam, nor as a form of old religious heresy, but rather as an offshoot of a kind of Sufism which adapted itself to Kurdish customs” (During 2005:136).

Ahl-e-Haqq followers, however, believe that this path has existed since the beginning of time, and as it is described in their sacred book *Kalām-e Saranjām*¹⁰, the

secret instructions and teachings of this religion had been known to Prophets and saints and passed on to a few confidants during each mythical period. They believe that God appeared to saints in three cycles. In the beginning, God had created seven angels as guardians of entities such as the sun, sky, moon, stars, water, earth, fire and metal. In the first cycle, Alī and his seven spiritual ranks (*Haftan*¹¹) succeeded God and the seven angels. The second cycle started when Shāh Khwashin and his seven companions ascended to the highest spiritual ranks. Sultān Sahāk and his seven saints were the third and final cycle's successors. It was during the fourteenth century CE that Sultān Sahāk revealed the eternal secrets in the form of a doctrine to his companions. He is therefore considered the founder of this path. According to the doctrines of the Ahl-e-Haqq religion, every follower has to follow a Pīr as a pathfinder to whom submission was owed. Since Sultan Sahāk was not married and had no children, he selected seven families as the guardians of truthfulness so that subsequent generations would have Pīrs and pathfinders at all times. The number of these families has increased to eleven now, and their leaders are called *Seyyed*.¹² They have access to the sacred texts which they refer to as *Kalām*. Hence, *Sādāts*¹³ are the descendants of these eleven families, and the custom is that they read out hymns and prayers on food offerings for the rituals as no one is allowed to eat them without their blessings. Each of these families has certain responsibilities with respect to rituals and ceremonies.

According to the *Kalām-e Saranjām*, every member of Ahl-e Haqq must become submissive to a Pīr from the family into which he or his father was initiated. Such initiation is called *Sar Sepordan* which literary means “dedicating the head,” implying the willingness and desire of committing one's life to Ahl-e Haqq's principles.

A Pīr, who is from Sādāt family, is believed to have inherited the divine essence of his ancestor, Pīr Benyāmīn, who was the incarnation of Archangel Gabriel. Hence by such dedication, the Ahl-e Haqq believe that they commit themselves to the original covenant between the Divine and the eternal master, Gabriel. Therefore by promising obedience to a Pīr, he, in turn, would guide the commoners along the right path.

There are two types of submissive followers: *chekīde* who are those that have been of Ahl-e-Haqq for generations and *chaspīde* who are newcomers that have converted to this religion through inner soul awaking.

The main pillars of this religion—*pākī* (purity), *rāstī* (truthfulness), *nīstī* (non-existence), and *radā* (chivalry)—are the same for all families and groups of Ahl-e Haqq. *Pākī* means that an Ahl-e Haqq person should be clean and pure both in his/her outer physical attributes such as body, clothing, living spaces, place of work, and foods, and in his/her inner virtues, mind, and deeds. *Rāstī* refers to upholding God’s commandments. In other words, it means serving God and abstaining from sins. *Nīstī* denotes renouncing pride, selfishness, ego, and all moral vice and devoting oneself entirely to God. Finally, *Radā* means humbleness, forgiveness, and generosity of individuals without expecting something in return. In addition, the principle of *Imān* (Faith) is central to Ahl-e Haqq religion.

There are four stages of understanding and practices in Ahl-e Haqq: *Shari’at* (Islamic law), *Tarīqat* (mystical path), *Ma’refat* (gnosis), and *Haqīqat* (truth). *Sharī’at* is a foundation of the religion that gives moral and ethical guidance for living in this world. *Tarīqat* means the spiritual path toward God. *Ma’refat* is deep knowledge of the Divine and spiritual truth. After passing these three stages, the Ahl-e Haqq reach the highest

level, *Haqīqat* (truth), at which they realize all is God and no one is separate from God. Naming themselves Ahl-e Haqq (people of truth), implies that they consider themselves as having already passed the first three stages and now are ready to take the final stage; hence they believe there is no obligation for them to observe and practice some of the Sharī'at rules.

The manifestation of divinity in physical form, which is always in circulation among selected few, is called the flow of *maz'har* to *maz'har*. If a physical vessel is complete, then the Divine will manifest itself through it, and it is possible for the divine essence to reveal itself in all its glory as it did with Alī ibn abī Tāleb. The Ahl-e Haqq believe in seven consecutive manifestations and states where the Divine along with few archangels unite and appear in earthly bodies. This reincarnation is likened to that of being dressed, and they name it *dun* or robe. They believe that the first full manifestation of divinity has occurred unto Alī and the last such epiphany unto Sultān Sahāk some seven centuries later. That is why they equate Alī with Sultān Sahāk and say that he is the *dun* or manifestation of Alī.

They do however differentiate between *dun -ā- dun* and reincarnation. *Dun -ā- dun* is a period of approximately 50,000-year cycles where a soul has to go through purification journeys to reach its final evolutionary status. It means going from one robe to another. The soul will pass through different life forms from plant to animal to human beings, and after every cycle, it enters a transitional world where it will be judged and sent to another family to be tested again. It is after passing through a thousand cycles of fifty- year periods that a human soul will reach its full potential and the essence of God will appear in it. It is worth noting that believing in *dun -ā- dun* helps Ahl-e Haqq to

connect prophets, saints and prominent religious figures to their religion when in historical terms they do not belong to it.

Ahl-e Haqq mostly live in small towns and villages and that partial isolation helps them preserve their traditions and beliefs. Through time, indigenous beliefs have found their ways into the religion of Ahl-e Haqq. During one of the interviews, Armān Dakeī pointed out several times that Ahl-e Haqq people were hard-working people. On several occasions during the interviews, he narrated personal accounts of his ancestors' experiences illustrating their tough and laborious lifestyles. Once he told me about his grandfather's life¹⁴:

My grandfather's hand was so hardened and calloused that when he was shaking our hand, we could feel the roughness of his skin. When he wanted to play tanbūr, he did not use his nails because they were broken all the time. He was playing it using his fingertips and because of that, his fingertips were always wounded.^{15,16}

Harsh geographical terrains and lack of resources constituted challenging lifestyle. To survive such demanding conditions, and alleviate daily strains, and empower the society to move on, they had to find relief and motivation using elements such as music and poetry in their everyday lives. Many of these elements and practices related to work and daily life gradually became so important that they eventually received a sacred status in their religion.

The regional geographical landscape has also been an important element both for creating and preserving their sacred beliefs. The Kurdish Ahl-e Haqq people of Kermanshah province are divided into two groups living in the east in the city of Sahneh, and in the west near the Iraq border in *Gurān* region. Different practices of the same rituals can easily be noticed among the Ahl-e Haqq people in these two regions. Leonard Primiano defines vernacular religion as “religion as it is lived: as human beings

encounter, understand, interpret and practice it” (Primiano 1995:44). By coining the term “vernacular” he describes the dynamic progress of lived religion and belief. These existing visible differences among the Ahl-e Haqq practices, highlight the power of communities of individuals who create and re-create their own religion (Primiano 2014:383). The individual’s recreations of their beliefs have led to different practices amongst Ahl-e Haqq; to truly understand those observations, research and study should be peculiar to a single area and a small group of people.

Because individuals of these communities practice religion in the context of everyday life, spiritual beings and figures are involved in daily practices, unlike the orthodox methods where they are separated from ordinary life and practiced in abstraction or special locations. The spiritual beings must provide healing, protection, and ethical guidance for everyday human needs. The results of these acts are crucial for the continuation of faith. Hence, it opens doors to practices that are not officially accepted by authorities.

Music is one of these practices that distinguish the Ahl-e Haqq religion from the mainstream Islamic theological teaching according to which practice of music is prohibited. Asking Armān Dakeī about how music became the most important element among Ahl-e Haqq, he answered:

The people of this region have lived with music and tanbūr since ancient times. When Islam and later Shia beliefs found its way into this region, it became very difficult for people to accept the harsh dogmatic views of this new religion. To help people to better come to grasp with this bitter tasting religion and more easily ‘swallow’ its doctrines, the leaders and Pīrs decided to combine their vernacular practices with the newly enforced religion.¹⁷

Over time, music has become the central element and played a significant role in both ritual performances and the transmission of sacred poems of this vernacular religion.

(Kreyenbroek 2010:83)

Two important pillars of Ahl-e Haqq religion are *Nazr*, or vow of blessed food, and music (During 1999:57). They symbolize two facets of sacrifice, the former a physical and tangible one, and the latter a spiritual one where the music personifies food for the soul. The music they play and listen to should always be under control and “not entice the listener or performer to neglect sacred meaning for musical enjoyment” (Ozdalga, 2004:i). The performance of sacred music during Ahl-e Haqq rituals will gradually lead to entrancement and occasionally will elevate to *samā* which literally means “listening.” Through immersing oneself into sacred music some individuals start to feel the holy rhythms preparing their souls for a deeper understanding of divine music and entering the spiritual realm.¹⁸

The concepts of good feeling and *samā* among the Ahl-e Haqq are best described as “the effect of music on the listener rather than with music per se” (Qureshi 1993:109). The euphoric effects of music or “good feelings” as they like to call it are affirmed by people’s strong faith in their religion. During *Jam*, the most important ritual among Ahl-e Haqq, music plays an important role in the preparation of the place for the appearance of divine essence. When *tanbūr* is played in *Jam*, the playing invites supernatural spiritual entities to join the ritualistic circle and participate in spreading around positive energy, mercy, and blessings. The participants in *Jam* will either personally benefit from the presence of spiritual aura by strengthening their faith and religious enthusiasm, or, their cumulative positive energy could help to alleviate an individual’s ailment whether they

are present at the *Jam* or not. There is strong belief that in *Jam*, all participants' problems, whether physical, mental, or financial, will be resolved by the Divinity. Healing through music such as biting the end of a *tanbūr*'s neck to cure influenza symptoms is common among the Ahl-e Haqq (During 2008:364). However, healing in the context of a sacred ritual through collective energy is their elixir of life.

My intention in conducting this research is to examine the meaning of the word "healing" among the Ahl-e Haqq and how believers view healing as a part of collective beliefs and not merely as a subject separate from their religion. An important note to consider about the meaning of the word *healing* among the Ahl-e Haqq and more generally in the Middle East is that it is not about directly curing an ailment, but rather about having good feelings that will lead to recovery and good health. To reach my goal of understanding the vernacular perception of healing among the Ahl-e Haqq, I started doing ethnography among the people of Sahneh, where I hope that this thesis will be a good start for a further understanding of healing belief systems among Muslim communities and especially Sufi groups. It should also be noted that much work is needed to truly present all aspects of the Ahl-e Haqq's life and beliefs.

Previous Works on this Topic

Several studies have been carried out on the Ahl-e-Haqq group and their beliefs both in and out of Iran. Aside from my personal intrigue, the following reasons encouraged me to select this group for my studies. Foremost is the fact that although most of the papers and books written about the Ahl-e Haqq look at their worldview and theology based on previously existing texts and only a few of them conducted any in-

depth ethnography. Since studying vernacular religions is highly context-dependent, most of these studies do not give the emic perspective of this religion. For instance, Ziba Mir-Hosseini has collected interesting information about Ahl-e Haqq, but she presents it out of context and without methodological coherence. She has also examined the empirical data without thoroughly exploring their traditional culture, which despite having interesting and relevant information about this group, falls short to emically represent the Ahl-e Haqq culture.

One important work is Reza Fariborz Hamzeh'ee "Yaresan: a Sociological, Historical and Religio-Historical Study of a Kurdish Community" which emphasizes the relations of Ahl-e Haqq religion to ancient religions and cults. However, his work relies on written sources rather than oral traditions despite his Ahl-e Haqq origin.

Jean During, a French ethnomusicologist, has worked on Ahl-e Haqq people and their beliefs about religion and music and has published several books and articles about this group. His book about Ahl-e Haqq sacred music is an important and significant resource for scholars in this field; however, his musical repertoire is mostly based on Nūr Alī Elahi's¹⁹ works which are not approved of by Ahl-e Haqq people.²⁰ Based on interviews and feedbacks I received, the Ahl-e Haqq people believe that During did not present their religious worldview and consequently their music accurately. Even though, he is one of the few scholars who points out the power of healing among the Ahl-e Haqq and provides some examples, he has not, however, carried out any particular study about healing beliefs among this group. In his book entitled *Music and Mysticism*, he briefly discusses the "good feeling" people gain during their rituals, but he does not explain his experiences and observations about this matter.

In her dissertation, entitled “Performing the Belief: Sacred Musical Practice of the Ahl-i Haqq of Guran,” Partow Hooshmandrad has carried out valuable work about this group’s music. Although she gives us information about the organology of tanbūr and the Ahl-e Haqq musical repertoire and briefly points out the relationship between Pīr, tanbūr, and healing, she does not, however, go into details about this section of her study.

Seyyed Khalīl Ālīnezhād, a religious leader and a prominent musician of the the Ahl-e Haqq, successfully tried to introduce their music to the world. His book *Tanbūr: az Dīrbāz tā Konūn* (Tanbūr: From Ancient Times to Present) contains detailed information about the history of this sacred instrument, its different variations, structure and construction of tanbūr, and scholarly works in this area. Although he does not refer to any connection between sacredness of the instrument and healing, nevertheless, some parts of the book are important in the study of healing aspects of Ahl-e Haqq music.

However, there is no independent research conducted about the music of Ahl-e Haqq and its relation to healing. Knowing about this association not only provides deeper understanding of the perception of Ahl-e Haqq people about ailment and healing but also will be of great value in understanding Islamic traditional medicine. This research will also shed light on the cultural context of this religious group and open doors for more observational studies of the Ahl-e Haqq.

Methodology

Through utilizing the models carried out by researchers on similar cases, I decided to research the Ahl-Haqq’s religion, beliefs, and traditions, as well as the effects of collective energy and music on the individual wellbeing of this group. I have chosen

ethnographic methodology as the base for my work by collecting first-hand empirical perspectives through interviews and participant observation. Ethnography was the best way to study how music and prayers thrive and are an inseparable part of their daily experiences and healing practices. For this I embarked on a month-long journey to western Iran, staying in the city of Sahneh, in Kermanshah province, which has a population of 50,000 Ahl-e Haqq followers. I have continued my consultation through Skype and telephone until finalization of this thesis.

Through constant interaction with individuals, I familiarized myself with their daily life routines, beliefs, customs, and religion. Visiting their sacred sites and recording their music required the permission and blessings of their religious elders, which was wholeheartedly granted albeit with some restrictions in certain areas. The interviewees for this research were all from the city of Sahneh and of Ahl-e Haqq followers, except one person who had been accepted into Ahl-e Haqq religion at a later age and who lived in Shiraz, Fars. I had the privilege of meeting different individuals from various Ahl-e Haqq *khāndān* and interview them about their worldview and more specifically their collective beliefs about healing. I closely worked with and spent more time interviewing people from the following *khāndāns*²¹: Zolnurī, Khamūshī, Ālī Qalandar, and Shāh Hayās. Armān Dakeī, a religious scholar from a Shāh Hayās family, was my main interviewee in the field of history, music, people's beliefs, and healing stories. He was also the person who accompanied and introduced me to Ahl-e Haqq people in Sahneh.



Figure 2: Armān Dakeī, from Shāh Hayās khāndān, the principle source of information and interviewee of the author (Photo by Mohammed Kharāt Zāde)

There were also another three interviewees, Mehrāb Esrāfīlī, Seyyed Reza Rūhtābī, and Nakīsā Zolnurī, whom I interviewed several times in the field of music and its relation to people's beliefs and its healing abilities.

During this period, I also studied and researched their primary musical instrument, tanbūr, by which they play their sacred music, and gathered useful information about its production and their beliefs about the creation of this sacred instrument. By interviewing Seyyed Saeed Zolnurī, a tanbūr-maker master, and spending some time in his workshop, I gained valuable knowledge about the process of producing a sacred instrument and the idea of sacred sound.

Once I had carried out interviews and consultations with researchers and had become confident that I was approved off and accepted by the Ahl-e-Haqq society of Sahneh, I started collecting books and writings about this group and their sacred

instrument tanbūr to broaden my knowledge in this field. I used and consulted with written sources for specific information and findings which I had not recorded during fieldwork. Having collected essential information and materials for research, I will study these interviews not just as mere texts, but also in relation to fieldwork and other empirical materials. My focus will be on the concepts of *healing* and *illness* as they were referred to during the interviews, from an emic point of view.



Figure 3: Mehrāb Esrāfīlī, from Ālī Qalandar khāndān, a prominent tanbūr instrumentalist (Photo by Author)

The most important decision was selecting an area to carry out fieldwork. After studying and reviewing all options, I decided on the city of Sahneh, primarily because of the religious significance it has for the Ahl-e Haqq. The city and its rural areas host many sacred places and shrines, to which I visited and were crucial for this research. In addition, the people I knew were all from that city and being introduced and accompanied

by a respected member of their religion would remove any reservations they might have about my intentions and presence among them.



Figure 4: Seyyed Reza Rūhtābī, From Khamūshī khāndān an acclaimed musician of old and authentic tanbūr repertoires (Photo by Author)

I also got to know some of the Ahl-e Haqq people from Gūran region and arrange several meetings with them to discuss and gain more knowledge about Ahl-e Haqq and their beliefs, particularly about healing. Because of geographical, historical and cultural differences between Ahl-e Haqq groups in different cities and villages, I carried out my primary research in Sahneh, and this thesis is based on information I gained in this particular geographical area. Sahneh is also the birthplace of some of the most famous Ahl-e Haqq musicians. Seyyed Khalīl Ālīnezhād was born in Sahneh where he spent most of his life. Stories of him playing tanbūr and healing people are well known among the people of Ahl-e Haqq. Selecting Sahneh provided an opportunity to hear and collect

peoples' stories and experiences first hand, however, I could not secure permission to redistribute most of these stories.



Figure 5: Nakisā Zolnurī, son of Seyyed Saeed Zolnurī, tanbūr performer and musical instrument-maker
(Photo by Author)

Despite the availability of some information about Ahl-e Haqq's theological views and beliefs, many aspects of their religious life, practices, and traditions are unknown to outsiders. One of the main reasons for this enigma is the secrecy surrounding this religion. Non-believers are not allowed to attend and witness most of its rituals. Another significant obstacle is the geopolitical uncertainty of the Kurdistan Area. The central government is always wary of people becoming indoctrinated and joining this group and its religion, while conversely, the locals are afraid that outsiders might penetrate their society and pass on sensitive information to authorities that could potentially cause problems for their way of life and further restrict their religious

freedom. The traditional culture of the area does not welcome outsiders into the Kurdish community, and it makes it very difficult for researchers to do their observations and studies. Many of the recent studies done on this subject are only based on written religious texts or historical accounts of these people.



Figure 6: Seyyed Saeed Zolnuri, master tanbur manufacturer (Photo by Author)

Although Ahl-e Haqq people welcomed, and shared an important part of their culture and religion with me, I was not given permission to participate in the *Jam* ritual to observe the gathering. Non-Ahl-e Haqq people are not allowed to take part in this ritual and even in special circumstances where a Pīr gives permission of participation to non-believers, women are forbidden from this ritual. However, to better observe, understand and get a sense of this important ritual, Armān Dakeī was able to arrange a meeting to visit a Pīr from the Khaksār Dervish group. Therefore, I was able to travel to Kermanshah

city and attend their ritual, as they are not very sensitive and restrictive about nonbelievers' participation.²²

Based on information I gathered from interviews, it is crucial to point out that the people of Ahl-e Haqq who live in Kermanshah Province do not accept the findings of most of the available analysis and studies carried out about their culture and view them as inaccurate representations of their views. Even the information that has been published by Nūr Alī Elāhī and his son, both of Ahl-e Haqq followers, is believed to have been distorted and changed to meet Western standards. The publication of this inaccurate and misleading information has led to the dissatisfaction of different groups of Ahl-e Haqq people who live in Iran. Conflicts between these opposing groups continue to this day. An important factor for unpopularity of these studies is the diversity of beliefs among these people. Although they all belong to Ahl-e Haqq, different geographical terrains and ancient beliefs of each area plus modern schools of thought have all influenced and affected the interpretations that various Ahl-e Haqq groups have of their religion. These differences can be seen even among those living in proximity to each other. Oral culture has had the greatest effect on this matter, as the absence of a single reference book for religious inquiries has led to a variety of interpretations based on geographical location and religious needs.

While carrying out field work the first thing people asked me was to reproduce and tell their history, beliefs, and worldviews according to their explanations and not based on written materials published to date. They were adamant that I confer with them about the authenticity and credibility of any written materials I deemed necessary to quote or use in my research. Therefore my research primarily focuses on the people of

Sahneh and specifically the aforementioned families and not necessarily the majority of Ahl-e Haqq believers.

The Thesis

The notion of healing has become closely associated with the Ahl-e Haqq sacred ritual *Jam*. Several key elements have to be present for a *Jam* ritual to commence. To better understand *Jam* and the characteristics of its healing power, it is necessary to have knowledge about Ahl-e Haqq's sacred instrument (*tanbūr*), their sacred texts (*kalām*), the food blessing (*Nazr*), and the ritual procedures (*Jam*). I will explain these elements in three chapters.

The sanctity and sacredness of *tanbūr* will be the focal point of the second chapter entitled "Tanbūr: Crafting and Playing the Musical Instrument and its Sacred Status." This instrument embodies the divine presence and secretly carries the divine message of Ahl-e Haqq religion. *Tanbūr* is the main musical instrument used in Ahl-e Haqq's religious and spiritual ceremonies, and the whole sacred repertoire of Ahl-e Haqq music is performed using this instrument. Being of significant importance for having divine power, it is important to study and shed light on *tanbūr* as an object that exists at the intersection of material, cultural, and social worlds. By analyzing the complex union between humans and musical instruments and using Eliot Bates's term "the social life of musical instruments," I will argue the socio-cultural life of *tanbūr* among Ahl-e Haqq to showcase its healing effects. The chapter is primarily written based on interviews with Seyyed Saeed Zolnūrī, a well-known Iranian *tanbūr*-maker who has been awarded the UNESCO certificate of authenticity. I also delve into the origin of *tanbūr*, the current

social and cultural role of tanbūr, its sacred presence in rituals, and its relations with healing.

Chapter three, “*Kalām*, the Ahl-e Haqq Sacred Text,” concerns the Ahl-e Haqq *kalām* (word(s)). The Ahl-e Haqq followers believe that essential and secret ideas of their religion are embodied in their *kalām*. These words, which are in the form of poetry and predominantly in the Gūrani dialect, have been carefully preserved and transmitted orally through generations. It was not until the nineteenth century that they started to record their *kalām* which is now available in written collections (Mir-Hosseini 1996:118). Until recently, these *kalāms* were vigorously guarded as it was totally forbidden for outsiders and even most people in their community to read and recite its verses. Even though understanding and exploring the Ahl-e Haqq texts requires a separate research, it was important to include a chapter on these sacred texts to show the bond that exists between *kalām* as words, the divine origin, and sacred music, and how they are intertwined with the *Jam* rituals.

In the fourth chapter entitled “The *Jam* and Healing rituals of Ahl-e Haqq,” I focus on the principal ritual of this group, *Jam*. This ritual of food blessing (*Nazr*) is a religious obligation for Ahl-e Haqq people. Although it is not mandatory to have music during *Jam*, it is generally held with the presence of sacred music. The reason for introducing music into this sacred ritual is to practice worship through soul purification and to invite the soul of Sultān or other spiritual entities to join the ritual and bless this gathering with spiritual gifts including good feelings and healings.

The last chapter is the conclusion, in which I argue that their religious beliefs and practices help them avoid and alleviate the effects of negative thoughts and forces, by

replacing them with love and harmony in aspiration of achieving good feelings. It is through these ideas that they can find healing in rituals, receive divine love and push away negative thoughts, the primary sources of diseases and ailments from their point of view. By using sacred music, a central aspect of their vernacular religion, Ahl-e Haqq people find empowerment by healing.

Chapter Two

Tanbūr: Crafting and Playing the Musical Instrument and its Sacred Status

*“Its head, its veins (strings), and its skin are all desiccated and dead.
Whence comes, then, the Voice of my Friend?” ~ Parviz Ney Dāwud*

“Tanbūr talks to me and plays my inner emotions,¹ I heard this sentence when I was conducting an interview with Seyyed Mehrāb Esrāfīlī. Hearing similar sentiments from other Ahl-e Haqq members in Sahneh, it became apparent that this instrument commands a special respect and a significantly higher status among Ahl-e Haqq than other “mere” musical instruments. Believers regard tanbūr as a living entity that can affect human emotions and even health. I was compelled by this intriguing idea to learn more about the influences of tanbūr on Ahl-e Haqq’s social and cultural lives and how it influences people’s health.

Most of the scholarly research about this subject have been concerned with collecting and cataloging Ahl-e Haqq’s rich musical repertoires, discussing different methods of manufacturing a tanbūr, and describing its sound and techniques employed in playing it. Although these studies are important in coming to a better understanding of this sacred musical instrument, they are not sufficient to comprehend tanbūr’s understood role in healing. For this reason, I will attempt to show how tanbūr exists in both conceptual and physical contexts, and how, as elegantly put by Eliot Bates, it has a “social life” (Bates 2012:372).

Genevieve Dournon's book entitled *Guide for the Collection of Traditional Musical Instruments* was among early works that attempted to highlight the importance of cultural and social aspects of instruments. She notes:

A musical instrument, which is not like other objects, is a tool that both produces sound and carries meaning. The acquisition of musical instruments should give rise to a specific, in-depth study for the purpose of gathering all relative information, not only concerning musical aspects but with regard to all the other fields that make up the socio-cultural context as well (Dournon and Arom, 1981:9).

Some years later, Sue De Vale stressed a broader study of instruments "to help explain society and culture," especially where they might encompass unique stories, narratives, and sets of social relations (De Vale 1990:22). Another notable work published on this subject is by Regula Qureshi entitled "How Does Music Mean? Embodied Memories and the Politics of Affect in the Indian sarangi," in which she argues the symbolic meanings of musical instruments in the context of cultural knowledge (Bates 2012:368). These works have been influential in better understanding the symbolic meanings of tanbūr and how this musical instrument functions in term of its physical existence and the positive effects of its sound.

Among other important works in this field is Eliot Bates's article "The Social Life of Musical Instruments," in which he argues for broadening the study of instruments to understand the relationship between music and ordinary members of society, especially nonmusical roles of instruments in society. He stresses that musical instruments are neither a subject nor an object, but rather should be considered as a source of action (372). In other words, musical instruments both shape and are shaped by the music and culture of their context. Based on his argument, I am looking for reciprocal relations of

humans, objects, and divinity that can be seen in the production process involving tanbūr, performance, and musical healing.

Ustād Saeed Zolnurī and his Tanbūr Workshop

Before starting my trip, I asked Armān Dakeī to arrange for an interview with Ustād Saeed Zolnurī², a master tanbūr maker in Sahneh. I was sure that if I wanted accurate information about Ahl-e Haqq music and its relation to their health beliefs, I should learn more about their sacred instrument, and the best way to do it was to observe the process of making it. When I visited the master craftsman at his workshop, I realized that understanding the process was far more important to an understanding of the Ahl-e Haqq's beliefs than I had envisioned.

To better prepare myself and fine-tune the questions to ask, I conducted several interviews with other Ahl-e Haqq musicians in the region of Sahneh before visiting Ustād Saeed Zolnurī. Ustād Zolnurī's place was quite specious and was separated into two sections. The front section was being used as a workshop, and the inner section as a store. Entering the shop, on the left side I saw a big wooden worktable with wood scraps and unfinished pieces scattered all over on top, and behind it was racks of shelves mounted on the wall that housed numerous peculiar shaped tools, indicating that it was the place where he constructed his famous instruments.

On the right was Ustād Zolnurī's office consisting of a simple wooden desk and a couple of chairs. On the desk, I could see an old computer desk and monitor, and an old style rotary-dial telephone and a stack of papers and few pencils. The large glass façade of the shop let in bright light and gave the place a warm feeling. The thatch walls were

covered with old and new tanbūrs, strings, and black-and-white pictures of past and recent master tanbūr players. The ceiling was totally hidden under a thick bush of branches which gives the whole workshop the sense of an old traditional shed. Pieces and parts of both finished and unfinished sections of tanbūr instruments lay everywhere, which provided me with an excellent opportunity to observe the many stages and processes of the design and making of the instrument



Figure 7: Ustād Zolnūrī's workshop (photo by Author)

The smell of freshly cut and carved wood and the sight of its different shades and colors were noticeable everywhere. Ustād Zolnūrī offered us a seat towards the end part of the workshop, which according to custom is an area reserved for honored guests. The seats were covered with Iranian *Gelims*³. There were two old sofas in the right side of the

workshop near the window for guests and musicians who regularly visit the place and fine-tune their tanbūr. To make the shop welcoming to both Ahl-e Haqq and outsiders, he had not placed or hung any specific religious iconography or even an image of his family tree on the walls, as might otherwise be customary. From where I was sitting, I could see the numerous citations and certificates Ustād Zolnurī had earned from UNESCO and other renowned institutions, awarded for his many years of designing and making tanbūr.



Figure 8: Ustād Zolnurī's workshop (Photo by Author)

As he told me, he has lived in Sahneh for his entire life, and he has been making tanbūr for thirty-eight years. His family members are well-known for playing tanbūr, and greatly respected for preserving Ahl-e Haqq literature and customs, and are also authorized to organize *Jam*. He is a very mild-spoken and modest man despite his vast

knowledge about instruments and the innovations he has incorporated in making tanbūrs. Knowing that I was a guest of Dakeī's family and was accompanied by Armān to Sahneh, Ustād Zolnurī wholeheartedly welcomed me to his workshop and invited me to come back whenever I have any questions. I visited the workshop several times during the month I spent at Sahneh and had the honor of observing the construction process and obtaining answers to the questions that would arise during the observation from the master himself.



Figure 9: Ustād Zolnurī in his workshop (Photo by Author)

Constructing the Sacred Tanbūr

The tanbūr is a stringed instrument with a long neck and a pear-shaped bowl, with either two or three strings. The process of crafting starts with the selection of sacred material, mulberry wood. Adjacent to almost all Ahl-e Haqq sacred shrines are ancient revered mulberry trees which are as sacred as the shrines themselves. People respect them and tie pieces of cloth on their branches in hopes of divine intervention in fulfillment of their requests. There are many stories and legends regarding the sacredness of mulberry trees among Ahl-e Haqq people. The most famous one is a story concerning the prophet Moses, as related by Armān Dakeī: “When Moses wanted to see the Almighty, God tells him to go to Tor⁴ Mountain and look at a tree that is surrounded by light. Once there God tells Moses: ‘Moses, I am the God of the world’ and that tree was a mulberry tree.”⁵

The Ahl-e Haqq truly believe that the sacredness of tanbūr starts with the choosing of a mulberry wood, which according to them is the embodiment of divinity. By placing a status of divinity on this type of timber, Ahl-e Haqq believe that celestial sounds arising from it make this instrument unique and sacred. By placing such faith on tanbūr, Ahl-e Haqq people bestow a supernatural power to their musical instrument. Tanbūr players tell a religious story that affirms their sincere belief in this matter. They stress that at the dawn of creation when God ordered the soul to enter the human body, it did not show any enthusiasm. Then Gabriel, whom they believe was the first to play the tanbūr, started playing, and the soul became so intoxicated and enchanted by the sound of the music that it wholeheartedly entered the human body. From that time, tanbūr and human souls have made a connection and as they say “when you play tanbūr, you play your soul⁶.” (Ālīnezhād 2005:20) The phrase entwines the subject (player) and the object (tanbūr) into a singular unit that plays together.

Mulberry wood is used for the most important part, the bowl. Ustād Zolnurī emphasized that choosing the right type of mulberry wood is crucial; for instance, the best sound comes from a mulberry tree which bears amethyst-colored fruit. Choosing the right wood for making a bowl is one of the most important and challenging parts of crafting a tanbūr. As Ustād told me, he makes tanbūrs for individuals based on their gender, age, hand size, personality, and their feelings. So each tanbūr is unique, and its sound should serve the owner's feelings. That is why Ustād Zolnurī is so sensitive and cautious in choosing his wood.

Usually, there is no visible separation between a tanbūr-maker and a performer amongst the Ahl-e Haqq. In other words, tanbūr-makers are traditionally proficient in playing tanbūr. Besides being a master craftsman Ustād Zolnurī is a keen tanbūr player as well. However, out of deep respect for his master and other master performers, he prefers not to be called a tanbūr performer. He was an apprentice of Ustād Seyyed Amrollāh Shāh Ebrahīmī, who was probably the best tanbūr player in Sahneh. During his apprenticeship, he gained the ability to distinguish between sounds a well-designed and crafted tanbūr would make, in contrast to more common commercial types. He described the two styles of tanbūr bowls and the different sounds they produce. One is crafted using a single solid piece of wood, and the other is made with strips of wood aligned beside each other in a pattern called *Tarkeyī*. The traditional practice is to use a single piece, carving the bowl out of the wood. This method preserves the distinctive qualities of the wood and produces good quality sound. As time passes, the sound quality will even improve.

Recently, however, rising material costs due to a shortage of walnut and mulberry woods has steered tanbūr-makers towards more cost-effective methods in which they cut out thin

strips of wood, boil them to achieve the flexibility they desire, and then paste them beside each other and shape them like a bowl. The process of boiling, however, changes the texture of the wood and consequently affects the sound quality. Ustād Zolnurī prefers to



Figure 10: Single piece carving tanbūr bowl (Photo by Author)

use the traditional way of making a tanbūr bowl because he believes that the secret of the “sacred language” of this instrument is hidden within the traditional construction process. The new way, even though it is a great way for the conservation of trees, will not produce the mystifying musical quality expected from a sacred instrument. It should be noted that although there are no official rules from government sanctioning the restrictions on use of wood, master tanbūr-maker have voluntarily started to use mulberry and walnut wood in the most proficient way. Therefore tarkeyī tanbūrs have filled the market even though the

sound quality is not comparable with the solid single piece bowl tanbūr. Moreover, because master players still prefer to play with single piece carving bowl tanbūrs, this model continues to be widely crafted by tanbūr-makers.



Figure 11: Tarkeyī tanbūr bowl (Photo by Author)

Ustād Zolnouri noted several times that he allowed the wood to talk to him and “tell him what to do.”⁷ He said: “When I hear the sacred voice of tanbūr calling me, I touch the wood and start to carve out the shape of the instrument that is hidden inside the wood.”⁸ Armān Dakeī added to Ustād Zolnūrī’s information and emphasized the importance of the presence of a Pīr for the blessing of the tanbūr-making process. Even though it is not essential, Armān asserted that the presence of a Pīr leaves a stamp of approval on the instrument’s sound.

Although Ustād Zolnurī does not mass produce his instruments; he has made many tanbūrs that are nowadays played by Pīrs, well-known Ahl-e Haqq musicians, and even common people. Each tanbūr is made based on the customer’s physical and emotional characteristics. He asks his customers to visit him in his shop and after spending time talking, analyzing, and understanding the person’s inspirations and feelings, as well as the size of the hands and other physical aspects of the body, he then starts working on the customer’s tanbūr.

The whole process of designing and making a tanbūr by Ustād Zolnurī is done manually. He points out that after carrying out many studies, he has finally determined the most authentic form for a tanbūr’s bowl. He asserts:

I have conducted many researches on tanbūr’s sound and bowls. I went through old pictures, and studied the structure of old tanbūrs that people were bringing to my workshop for repairs and after all these researches and studies, I have to say this is the most authentic bowl (referring to the bowl in his hand). The authentic bowl has a hump at the back curve of the bowl which I call it the “accent of tanbūr.” Unfortunately, there are many tanbūr-makers who craft tanbūrs according to their taste without any solid researches. They do not pay attention to the actual format. What they do not understand is that a tanbūr should possess that crucial accent. Someone who knows the sound of tanbūr will recognize the authentic sound hidden in the accent.⁹

“But how does someone determine the authenticity of tanbūr’s sound?” I asked Ustād Zolnurī.

The authenticity is in the “accent” of tanbūr and one can realize the authentic sound only if his/her soul is prepared to experience the feeling of spirituality. The authentic sound is easily recognizable because it is celestial and it mystifies you. It possesses your soul and your mind and you will feel it with every nerve in your body. The accent has spirituality, sacredness, and authenticity in itself.¹⁰

Clearly, the traditional shape of tanbūr is intrinsically spiritual and therefore authentic for him, but accent and emerging sound which refer to the sacredness and its relation to the spiritual world of this music instrument, is an important factor in realizing the

authenticity of a tanbūr. By maintaining the authentic shape of tanbūr which he has inspired from remaining old models, Ustād Zolnurī produces the “accent” which transforms worldly sound to a celestial and sacred music and in this way becomes a mediator between the spiritual world and the player. Therefore, using traditional tools and materials, he creates tanbūrs that produce the nearest sound to the original celestial one. Traditional techniques are not only necessary for establishing the originality and authenticity of a tanbūr, but they also link the instrument to the past, allowing it to entangle with mystical worlds to receive force and legitimacy from a higher power.

There is a correlation between Henry Glassie’s notion of how a Turkish carpet weaver will “transfer herself into wool, when thought becomes material, is central, fundamental, and it gathers a host of associations that fuse in the act of creation” and actions of a master craftsman creating a tanbūr (Glassie 1990:51). Although materials and function in tanbūr-making are different, Ustād Zolnurī similarly transfers his cultural identity, religious thoughts and beliefs into the wood, later to be physically expressed in the form of a tanbūr. By looking at the object’s creation in contexts of “technology,” “memory,” and “hope,” in Glassie’s terms, Ustād Zolnurī uses traditional technology, and memories of his ancestors about the object’s sacredness, hoping to create a celestial instrument, all at one time. At that instance, the “multiplex context of creation, meaning begins”(55).

I asked the Ustād how long it takes him to construct a tanbūr. He answered:

It is really difficult to respond to this question. Sometimes it takes me two months to make a single instrument. I must achieve that special feeling to make a tanbūr, because when one makes a tanbūr without the *hess* (feeling), the instrument will remain a mere ‘wood,’ an object, and will not yield the divine sensation you are seeking.¹¹

He added that genuine tanbūr players can easily detect the *hess* in the instrument. Hence, they demand tanbūrs which can deliver *suznāk* sound: a religious sound that penetrates the soul and burns the heart.

As he was hanging a recently carved bowl to dry naturally, he noted that some performers used to sacrifice a sheep before work could start on their tanbūrs in hopes of appeasing the Divine and assuring an outcome that would produce sacred sounds. This tradition can still be seen every once in a while although it has been phased out for some years now.

The History of the Sacred Tanbūr

The origin of tanbūr may go back to ancient times. Rock reliefs from three thousand years ago found in *Bani Yunes* hills in Mousel, Iraq, depict performers playing tanbūr-like instruments (Kākī 2009:23). Although there seems to be a tendency among scholars to accept the depicted instrument as a tanbūr, there is no definitive evidence that the instrument seen on the rock reliefs is the same tanbūr that the Ahl-e Haqq people use nowadays, as there are no clues that they had taken the idea and developed their musical instrument based on ancient instruments. The only tangible fact is that they believe in the sacredness of their instrument and its unique musical repertoires.

It is not known at what point the tanbūr became a sacred instrument of Ahl-e Haqq. The tanbūr was not considered a sacred instrument before the fourth century. Jean During asserts that “when Shah Khawshin, one of the God’s manifestations, used tanbūr to accompany the fellowships, ...from that moment onwards, tanbūr became the sacred instrument of Ahl-e Haqq” (During 1999:64).

For the Ahl-e Haqq believers, however, this instrument has been sacred since eternity. When I asked about the point in history in which the instrument became sacred, they did not provide a historical moment because from their point of view its sacredness is more important than any physical attributes or verifiable past. The sacredness of this specific instrument has given the Ahl-e Haqq a unique identity within the larger Kurdish and Iranian societies. By connecting the instrument to eternal time and divinity, they have affirmed the sacredness of tanbūr, empowered it with social and cultural roles that define their own community's identity, and made it the focal point of their religious experiences.

The Sacred Sound

My trip to Sahneh took place during Ramadan, a holy month in the Islamic calendar when all Muslims are obligated to fast from dawn to dusk. The first interview with Ustād Zolnuṛī took place at noon in his workshop and midway during the interview he put aside a half-carved bowl he was working on and sat down to answer my questions. I was about to ask the first question when he treated us to some cold refreshing ice creams his son had bought for us as their guests. This gesture added to my curiosity since shops usually close during the hot hours of early afternoons in Ramadan as most people stay at home for a siesta. Armān saw my hesitance and curious looks about being offered something to eat during the fasting period. He quickly informed me that in their religion, there is no obligation to fast during this month, and since they knew that as a Muslim I was relieved from observing this rule because I was on short trips away from my place of permanent residence, he was being hospitable.

When the moment was right, I asked him why it is that among all instruments which are important to Sufis and Ahl-e Haqq, tanbūr is the only one that is considered sacred. He answered:

There is a strange feeling, hidden in playing tanbūr that is not earthly. This instrument has a noble soul. When a performer plays tanbūr, the player and the instrument converse in a dialogue where at its climax reveals and pours out all of the humanity's secrets that had been built up in reincarnated souls of enlightened persons since the manifestation of Adam. It seems that during playing tanbūr, the existence of both the player and the instrument becomes unified, and they start conversing with audiences as a single entity.¹²

I asked Ustād Zolnurī for more explanation as to why this instrument has such a celestial and beautiful sound. He answered:

Tanbūr is an instrument of [] love. Its sound is the sound of *dūst* (divinity). There is an etymology from Darvish Alī Changī, a musician, and poet from 16th century CE, that says the word “tanbūr” consists of two syllabi, “tan” meaning heart, and “būr” meaning scratching. Therefore, tanbūr means: “an instrument that scratches your heart and affects your soul.”¹³

Even though the accuracy of this etymology is not academically approved, it illustrates their deep belief in the connections between the instrument, human soul, and divinity.

Henry Glassie suggests that a text has many contexts, and looking at artifacts in different contexts helps us understand the meaning of the object in question (Glassie 1990:60). Taking his suggestion, I would like to shed light on tanbūr in both physical and conceptual contexts. The physical context is the external physical existence of the instrument which we can experience through our visual and tactile senses. The conceptual context shows us that tanbūr as an object “exists within the sets of association that constitutes the mind of its creators and its users”(Ibid). The meaning of the sacredness of tanbūr is shared by people who make and play this instrument, even though in reality, this sacredness is not tangible outside the perception of the maker and

performer. This meaning has been shaped in the mindset of tanbūr makers throughout time, as they watched their elder masters and absorbed ideas and beliefs that Ahl-e Haqq society shaped in them. Without looking at conceptual context, the instrument remains a mere object, and we are not able to observe the cultural and spiritual role of this instrument among Ahl-e Haqq. As cited in Kevin Dawe’s article, this notion is emphasized by Margaret Kartomi where she illustrates that the meaning of a musical instrument as a cultural phenomenon that can result in a sharp differentiation between the point of view of an insider and the perception of an outsider in a particular culture (Dawe 2001:228). “Scratching the heart” is only meaningful in cultural and conceptual contexts; in a culture where the heart is believed to be the place of the Divine; attributing divine power to tanbūr shows that the soul of this instrument is sacred enough to reach the place of divinity. To believe in the Divine as the only true healer and his ever presence in heart, it becomes obvious why tanbūr plays such a significant role in healing traditions.

During the interviews, I used the word “performance” several times. Later when interviewing Seyyed Mehrāb Esrafilī, I realized that they preferred not to use this word because according to them, they are not routinely performing the same repertoires every time, but rather playing according to the specific feeling they sense at that particular moment.¹⁴ To them, the word “performance” suggests artifice, as they would only be going through the physical motions of playacting. In her article “The Secularization of Religious Ethnography” Diane Goldstein warned ethnographers about the secularization of religious speech by concentrating only on elements of its “performance.” She argues that “the characterization of acts understood by our informants as divine, under the rubric

of performance, becomes an insult to native interpretations. The secular model does not serve to clarify the ethnographic situation, it simply secularizes it.” (Goldstein 1995:28)

I myself experienced a similar uneasiness with the idea of tanbūr playing as a performance among the Ahl-e Haqq people. Therefore, I asked Seyyed Mehrāb Esrafilī about Ahl-e Haqq people’s definition of “performance.” He emphasized that tanbūr players in general and specifically during *Jam* do not perform for people or a divine entity, but rather, along with their instruments, they become vessels for spiritual expression and the divine message. He noted that although a player can see the audiences’ response, his¹⁵ main objective for playing is to concentrate on inviting divine spirits to the circle. When players play in the presence of holy spirits, they do not have control over their actions because they play according to their emotional feelings. When an act becomes a performance, Mehrāb said, people have control over it, and it becomes a show void of emotion. That is why each play conjures up different emotions. Developed by Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord, the oral formulaic theory explains that the basic units of composition in the epic are the traditional formula, the formulaic expression, and the theme (Lord 1971:4). By employing these elements in a creative manner, singers compose a new song “with every performance, even though the story line might remain the same”(Ibid). By the same token, the music of Ahl-e Haqq has the traditional formula, but by adding a touch of creativity and personal emotions to the song, the musicians create a new version of the same music line. Not having any written musical texts and notes, as Mehrāb explained, the new composition of the same song can occur commonly. They preserve their music orally from generation to generation. Therefore, they learn to play tanbūr through listening, observing and practicing their master’s skills.¹⁶ Although

this method of learning is fixed in its formula, it is deeply dependent on the emotions of players during the act. The music that is played in private circles has different emotions than the ones played in *Jam*.

Among all these musical variations there is one focal point that adherents emphasize: the beauty of the tanbūr sound, a sound that is spiritual, and that connects people to the spiritual world, making them forget everything about the material world. Regula Burckhart Qureshi highlights the importance of a musical instrument's sound as a cultural object, and notes how playing the instrument herself drew her to the "web of meanings emanating from the sound" (Qureshi 1997:1). In her paper, "The Indian Sarangi: Sound of Affect, Site of Context" she expresses her first experience with sound meaning, when her master taught her how to shape her first tune with beauty. She continues: "With this, I entered a distinctive sound world ranging from the ethereal to the down-to-earth, a sound world which is intimately connected to the object of the instrument itself" (Qureshi 1997:1). The same experience is easily noticeable among the Ahl-e Haqq people, who connect their cultural and religious beliefs to the musical instrument tanbūr, which ultimately shapes the distinctive sound of their musical instrument. As Ustād Zolnurī asserted:

Sometimes tanbūr has beautiful *suznāk* sound that is out of the master's control. All tanbūrs produce the same sound, regardless of what the master craftsman does and the wood quality. However, some of them produce an intoxicating sound that helps you forget all your pains and ailments. We do not know from where this sound originates; it seems that tanbūr has a soul which is divine.¹⁷

The divine-human relation of tanbūr has helped the Ahl-e Haqq people to carve a unique identity with the centrality of their music.¹⁸ Studying a sacred instrument that embodies the presence of divinity and its use in religious ceremonies shows us that tanbūr

is more than just a mere means to an end object. That is the reason why during *Jam* sessions, tanbūr is considered as one of the members of the ritual and receives a portion of the blessed food (I will discuss the blessed food in chapter four). Most importantly, Ahl-e Haqq people place their tanbūrs in the best location of their homes and the instruments are revered as sacred icons which possess constant purifying powers. The positive energy it releases, based on their belief, will bless their home. They believe tanbūr is the manifestation of Alī or one of the seven angels (Haftan). Hence, it is always greeted with a kiss, and when they intend to hold and use it, they whisper the powerful phrase *avval o akherim yār*¹⁹ into tanbūr which means “the first and the last is the [Divine] friend.”

The study of musical instruments in their various contexts provides us with a fascinating insight into the dynamic relations between humans and objects and how these relations go beyond the use of instruments as a mere source for producing music.

Finished Product

Interviewing Ustād Saeed Zolnūrī gave me a great insight about tanbūr and how the meaning of sacredness starts with choosing a right wood and improving it in the process of creating a tanbūr. When he finished crafting an instrument, he kissed it and whispered the words *avval o akherim yār* and by that the process of sacralization was completed. This new sacred instrument is now ready to be used in various ways, one of which is healing.

Chapter Three

Kalām, the Ahl-e Haqq Sacred Text

'O He whose name is a remedy and whose zikr (invocation) is the cure ~ Alī ibn abī Tāleb

Driving back with Armān after interviewing Ustād Zolnurī, I asked him if he had any musical recordings of Ustād's tanbūr. I was longing to experience the sacredness sense of the instrument and its celestial voice as so passionately described by Ustād Zolnurī during the interview. Fortunately, Armān had some recordings of musical pieces played by Mehrāb Esrāfilī in his cellphone. He connected his cellphone to the car's player for a louder and clearer voice.

While driving towards Jeyhūn Ābād to visit one of the Ahl-e Haqq's famous shrines in this village, I kept listening to the instrumental music performed by tanbūr. It was almost noon, and the weather was getting hot. However, despite the heat and tiredness, I could feel the power of the sacred sound of tanbūr. Following the music, there was a recording of chanting and spiritual singing. There were prayers recited in Kurdish language during the performance. These prayers and *zikrs* (I will explain in the following section) intoning with the music, induced an impressive jolt of energy. The chantings were melodic and loud and were coming from deep within the performers. The constant and gradually accelerated rhythms of the music accompanied by zikr contributed to a unique experience of transcendence.

Later that day, during a conversation with Armān, I enquired about the feeling I experienced in the car. While he was explaining the music, the power of sound and its impact on me, he emphasized that I should mostly give value to the sacred kalām and its effect on body and soul. I concluded that to understand the significance of kalām and its

relation to healing; I should focus on the role of sacred words in creating the transcendent and spiritual states where healings occur. Therefore in this chapter, I concentrate on the role of kalām, and its importance in the Ahl-e Haqq’s sacred ritual performances.

Zikr and the Ahl-e Haqq Sacred Text

One of the principal rituals of Sufi groups is *zikr*, an essential form of prayer in Sufism, which literally means “remembrance [of God].” In a broader sense, it is the ritualistic and rhythmic repeated recitation of set prayers and names of God silently or aloud, executed through complicated techniques of breath control, sometimes accompanied by rhythmic movements. The idea of *zikr* is not unique to Sufism. Remembrance of God is also encouraged in the Quran in Sura 13:28: “O ye who believe! Remember Allah with much remembrance”(Pickthall 2004:185). In time, this idea became a formal ritual practice involving God’s name, verbal phrases, and some combination of repetitive rhythmic patterns of sacred verses that were adopted and highly regarded by Sufis.

There are two different types of *zikrs*: silent *zikr* (*zikr khafi*) and audible *zikr* (*zikr jali*). *Zikr jali* is usually accompanied by *samā* and music. In reciting *zikr* as often as possible, Sufis are continuously reminded and hence made aware, of the Divine’s presence in all aspects of their physical, mental and emotional lives. Although both types of *zikrs* are known by Ahl-e Haqq people, according to Armān, *zikr khafi* is not as important for them as it is for dervishes and other Sufi groups. Armān explained that:

The notion of *zikr khafi* where one seeks a private place, stays away from his family and relatives and recites *zikr* to gain divine energy is influenced by dervishes’ line of thoughts. The Yāresānī people, however, believe that the energy and good feeling should be shared by all individuals present in a circle. If

someone feels joy, everyone in the group feels it, and if a group receives divine energy, all participants feel and share it. Because of the existing bond among these people even if one recites zikr silently, everyone would be delighted by it.

Therefore among Ahl-e Haqq, the word zikr refers consistently to zikr jali, the vocal zikr they recite in circles.

The main sources of most zikrs among the Sufis, in general, are Quranic phrases, God's names, poetry from Old Iranian mystical poets, and poems that sometimes the Pīrs write for specific occasions. The phrases they recite, therefore, are either Quranic or inspired phrase. The Ahl-e Haqq, on the other hand, use their sacred *kalām* as the main source for zikr, and other mentioned sources are seldom used.

The Ahl-e Haqq followers believe that essential and secret ideas of their religion are embodied in their *kalām*. These mainly poetic words are predominantly in Hawrāmī dialect. Traditionally these texts were not written down and only survived through constant repetition and chanting. It was not until the nineteenth century that they started to write out their *kalām*, which are now available in written collections (Mir-Hosseini 1996:118). One of the most important collections is *Kalām-e Saranjām*, which is believed to belong to the period of Sultan Sahāk, about eight hundred years ago. There are also other written *kalām* collections which belong to subsequent periods of manifestations and are equally sacred but not as important as *Kalām-e Saranjām*.

It is worth noting that there are a variety of both sacred and non-sacred texts that belong to the Ahl-e Haqq religion, and studying them all is a daunting task that cannot be accomplished in this thesis. However, the sacred texts used during *Jam* are of such value and significance that I have to shed some light on them to provide a better idea about their musical aspects and their effect on healing rituals. The texts are an inseparable part

of the sacred musical practice among Ahl-e Haqq. The following kalām can be helpful in better understanding the triangular relationship between text, music, and divinity:

“yār dīdakānī, Benyāmīn sāza, Pīr Mūsī sīma, Dāwed āvāza.”

“The Divine friend who resides in [my] eyes, Benjamin is a music instrument, Pīr Mūsī is the string [of this instrument], Dāwed is the āvāz (the traditional art of singing poetry) [of this instrument]. (During 1999:169)

This kalām clearly shows the bond between sacred texts and instrument and their relation to other aspects of Ahl-e Haqq religion. Based on this kalām, tanbūr, a divine’s vessel is the representation of Benjamin (the incarnation of Archangel Gabriel) while the strings and the music they produce represent Pīr Musī. The utterance of sacred words is associated with Dāwed who is the divine’s messenger and performer. He brings the news of Sultan’s presence by the most ubiquitous sound. The names of these three divine spirits are mentioned as YarīTan (the Three) many times in Ahl-e Haqq’s faith. The embodiment of divinity by the instrument, the music it produces and sacred texts emphatically shows the inseparable relations between music, sacred texts, and divine. They are intertwined and are meant to work together to make sense as a whole. When carrying out interviews in Sahneh, they often emphasized that if I wanted to grasp the healing perception of Ahl-e Haqq, I should know about all aspects of their religion. It is only then that I would be able to see the connection that exists between all concepts of the outer world which will eventually lead to inner knowledge.

The Sacredness of Text and The Meaning of Sacred

According to Armān’s account, kalām has existed during seven different periods of manifestations and each kalām is a foundation for the next one. They are therefore

related in meaning, subject, and the message. Hence, to understand the Ahl-e Haqq beliefs pertaining to them, one should read and understand them all. In referencing the sources of these kalāms, they mentioned several times that these sacred poems were uttered through the mouth of holy figures during each period. Using the verb “utter” (*talaāvat kardan*) instead of “compose” (*sorūdan*), the interviewees were constantly indicating that these poems are revelations from the Divine. The firm belief about this matter can be noted clearly in the following narrative told by Armān:

Heydar Kochakbalī, who is one of Ā Seyyed Berāka’s³ forty dervishes, was illiterate. He was a farmer and spent most of his life plowing the farmland. One day Ā Seyyed Berāka bestowed upon him his blessing, and he instantly became literate just like Mohammad [the Prophet]. According to the village people, this uneducated farmer suddenly started to say such exceptional poems that even the most knowledgeable individuals in this language and field could not understand their meanings. The obscure words and complex metaphors that exist in this collection are difficult and sometimes impossible to comprehend.⁴

The main reason why Ahl-e Haqq people pay close attention to these kalāms is that their sources are not terrestrial. They see them as divine knowledge which angels recite and relay to humans.

There is also the belief among Ahl-e Haqq that Kalām-e Saranjām was written by the “Golden Pen” of Pīr Mūsī, the angel in charge of recording human deeds (Mirhosseini 1994:268). As noted by Ziba Mirhosseini, no one has ever seen this text, although legend has it that there have been people who have seen this text with their own eyes (Ibid).

These books of the sacred poems are named after their poets; nevertheless, they are “thought to be revealed by a sacred spirit that would have manifested as, possessed, or become a ‘guest’ of that individual body for its complete or partial life time.”

(Hooshmandrad 2004:89). Therefore by associating these texts with the realms of

divinity, the words are empowered with supernatural abilities that can have significant influences on all aspects of human life, one of which can be health.

To come to a better interpretation of the term “sacredness,” it is essential to look at the word *moqaddas*, which is translated as “sacred” or “holy.” During interviews, I found out that this word has a wider connotation among the Ahl-e Haqq. On several occasions, the interviewees pointed out the consciousness and the enlivened nature and status of the kalām and its soul. In one of these interviews with Seyyed Mehrāb Esrāfīlī, he mentioned that:

The sacred kalām is not meant to be understood by human logic, it carries an extraordinary power of sacred spirit as a *serr* (secret), and this power can only be revealed to individuals who have the competence. Kalām has a sacred spirit which communicates with the person reciting it.⁵

Therefore for the Ahl-e Haqq sacred kalāms are texts that show signs of life and are living entities. For these followers, kalāms are not mere phrases but rather a set of divinely constituted living holy words that carry not only sacred messages but also are vessels for divine blessings.

Recitation of Sacred texts and Healing

The idea of inviting spirits to circle gatherings through the recitation of sacred texts for healing purposes is not exclusive to Ahl-e Haqq. For instance, Muslims recite Quran for the healing of illness and as a cure against demonic spells and misfortunes (Meri 2001:495-6). Even during earlier Iranian history, we see accounts of the importance of sacred words in healing. *Avesta*, the ancient scripture of Zoroastrianism, describes three types of doctors: those who heal with the knife (*karato-baeshazo*), those who heal with sacred herbs (*urvaro baeshazo*), and those who heal by sacred words

(*manthra baeshazo*) (Darmesteter 1880:83-84). The last group of physicians mentioned in the Avesta holds a more privileged status among physicians. The belief that divine words can heal all ailments has existed since ancient times and can still be seen among different ethnic and religious groups in Iran. For instance, the *Ishans*, Turkaman Healers, recite Quran to enable themselves to command the Jinns into submission and dialogue. They finish their treatment by reciting Quranic verses and prayers⁶ (Maghsudi 2014:70-73). Among various beliefs of healings through prayers, the Ahl-e Haqq likewise firmly believe that recitation of sacred kalām will have an effect on all aspects of human life, as long as one truly understands the *serr* (secret) embedded in those sacred words.

Until recently, outsiders were forbidden from reading and reciting sacred kalāms. The Ahl-e Haqq elite safeguarded these poems against outsiders, and even from most of their people within the community. Only a few people, such as Seyyeds and *kalām-khwāns* (kalām-reciters) were allowed access to them. Armān stressed that playing sacred music and reciting the sacred texts for outsiders was considered a great sin, and the offender would be socially and economically outcast by the community. That person was regarded as impious and rejected from all social activities.⁷ Although these days kalāms and other text collections are not confidential anymore and can easily be found and purchased, the Ahl-e Haqq believe that their meanings are still a mystery and only people who are deeply involved with and believe in the Ahl-e Haqq principles can understand them.

They believe that for a person to learn the encoded and secretive language of kalāms which may eventually lead to comprehension of the great wisdom of the Ahl-e Haqq, she has to successfully pass several stages of apprenticeship under the guidance

and auspices of a Pīr. Nowadays not all Ahl-e Haqq people know the Hawrāmī dialect; therefore at the first stage, individuals recite sacred poems without understanding their whole meaning. Practicing and learning under the supervision of experienced people helps individuals become familiar with the dialect and gradually understand the literary meaning of the poems. The next stage is learning about the history of their religion, the creation of the world, famous Ahl-e Haqq figures, and important events of the earthly realm and, as Ziba Mirhosseini notes, the divine realm as well. As she explains, the Ahl-e Haqq divide their universe between two separate but inter-related worlds: *zāher* (outer) and *bāten* (inner) (Mirhosseini 1996:119). For the Ahl-e Haqq, the inner world, which is a divine realm, is as real and tangible as the earthly world of *zāher*. When individuals gain the ability to understand the meanings of *kalām*, their minds will be opened to see the inner world and the secrets of the divine realm will be revealed to them. This spiritual awakening is only possible through repetition of reciting sacred poems. When I asked Armān about the process of deciphering and understanding the *kalām*, he reiterated the same process with an emphasis on completing the process under the auspices of a Pīr, who is a representative of the Divine on earth.

Recitation of Sacred Poems

Recitation of sacred poems is essential to the Ahl-e Haqq religion. Repeated recitations help individuals reach a higher spiritual awareness. In his book, *Miftāh al-falāh wa misbāh al-awrāh*, Ibn ‘Atā’ Allah⁸ describes the repetition of sacred poems as an act that will “free oneself from negligence of forgetfulness by the permanent presence of heart with God” (McGregor 1997:268). He recognizes three levels of recitations: that

of tongue (verbal), that of heart, and that of secret zikr. He explains that “invoking the letters of God’s name without presence of mind is invocation of the tongue; invoking with presence of mind is invocation of the heart; and invoking with an absence of self-awareness because of absorption in the Invoked is the invocation of the Self (or Secret)- this is the hidden invocation.”(268) These three recitation levels are parallel to those of the Ahl-e Haqq. In the beginning, they practice to learn the words and become prepared to focus on the next stage. On the second level, kalāms become internalized, and individuals start to feel the presence of spiritual power in their heart. At the third and final stage one finally comprehends and conceptualizes the meaning of revelation and divine truth, and it is at this moment that divine illumination becomes constant. It is for this reason that repetition of sacred poems has become so important for Ahl-e Haqq. What secrets or insights would be revealed or what would exactly occur during the final stage, remains vague as no specific details are provided. As I was informed, those individuals who reach the highest spiritual stage by the repetitive recitation of sacred poems do not divulge their experiences because divine secrets must not be revealed to uninitiated audiences. There is a strong belief that every experience differs from person to person, and each person should reach illumination by themselves.

Repetition, Oral Tradition, and Resistance to Writing

Although there are a number of printed Kalams available in libraries and bookstores not all Ahl- e Haqq people know these sacred poems. There are only a small group of people who comprehend and can read the kalām. Kalām-khwāns pride themselves on memorizing these poems, and they only use the written texts as aids to

memory. Although there have been several texts that were written by scholars and Ahl-e Haqq figures, they are still reluctant to publish their kalāms. In *Sacred Languages and Sacred Texts*, John Sawyer argues that when a group is forced into isolating itself from the rest of the society, the isolation is then expressed through the preservation of its language and texts (Sawyer 2012:25). These poems, which are vital sources of Hawrāmī dialect and Kurdish language, have also become an important element in the preservation of culture and religion of Ahl-e Haqq. Repetition promotes remembrance and memorization of these poems which are an integral part of these people's identity.

According to their belief, memorization of the texts and passing them down from generation to generation ensures the safeguarding of the sacred texts from being forgotten. Written sacred poems are always in danger of being eroded by various forces. Armān told me a narrative that explains the grave concern among the Ahl-e Haqq about losing the written texts. The narrative goes like this:

My mother's grandfather told me when Russians invaded Iran, Ahl-e Haqq had great anxiety concerning the preservation of Sheikh Amir's kalāms and ensured that they would not fall into the enemy's hand. So they loaded the thousand written stanzas of Sheikh's kalāms on a horse and tightened them firmly. They prayed that God would safeguard the horse and its load for they had placed their love on that horse. They let the horse loose in the desert. Unfortunately, the tie was loosened, and the written kalāms fell one by one. Later when people went to the desert to retrieve the kalāms, they could only find two hundred of them, and since no one had memorized the complete kalāms of Sheikh Amir, nowadays we only have two hundred stanzas, and the others did not survive the incident.⁹

This narrative illustrates two main concerns of the Ahl-e Haqq people: First, there is a constant fear that their knowledge may become public if and when their written texts fall into the hands of outsiders in a manner that might reveal the secrets of their religion. Secondly, there is always a significant possibility of losing parts of their texts by only

relying on written versions and not memorizing them. Therefore by preserving oral traditions, they prevent their knowledge of the sacred poems from ever becoming public, while the constant repetition of these poems enables them to recite the oral traditions in their entirety.

Another reason for reluctance in writing down these sacred poems is the traceability of text which might violate the sanctity of the kalāms. Possible desecration of sacred texts by non-believers in ways such as dropping them on the ground, among other worse acts of disrespect, is a sin that no one wants to be guilty of committing, even indirectly. For these same reasons, they are even reluctant about recording the recitations of the sacred texts. From my experience, they would mostly recite some of these sacred poems only when I asked them, except a few who very politely requested that I stop recording whenever they recited the kalāms.

The Preservation of Kalām

This strong belief in the sacredness of these poems has resulted in the careful preservation of kalāms. I was told that these poems have been preserved without any changes for many years. Barre Toelken suggests that tradition can be considered as a balance of elements that stay the same and elements that change. (Toelken 1996:39). In *The Dynamics of Folklore*, he indicates that folklore has qualities of being “dynamic” and “conservative” at the same time (39). These features allow folklore to be static but yet continue to change (39). The belief of the Ahl-e Haqq and their insistence on the preservation of the texts in its exact sentence structure, even though there is no tangible evidence as to its original form, are defined and enforced by the high hand of the

community, , ensuring that the sacred poems remain intact.¹⁰ The following narrative from the Ahl-e Haqq illustrates the importance of saving kalāms in their exact words:

There was a farmer who learned kalāms from his master and would hum them whenever he was plowing the land.

This practice became a daily routine until one day he suddenly became skeptical about the accuracy of one word. He immediately handed both his cows to his co-workers and embarked on a long journey to Gurān (which in those times would have taken days) to ask his master about the word and only then he returned home. (During 1999:49)

However, kalāms are allegorical, and the Ahl-e Haqq use these sacred poems to show symbolic understanding of the mystery through allegory. Accordingly, there are different ways to interpret these kalāms which allow individuals to take the meaning that best suits the period, events, and circumstances. Consequently, the meanings of these sacred poems are dynamic and not the same all the time. The dynamism is not in the words of the poem but its meaning.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that despite the dedication to accuracy in preserving and passing of the sacred poems intact both orally and written, different versions of some kalāms exists. Some of these kalāms were erroneously written by an original *kāteb* (scribe), and these mistakes kept on repeating in other copies.¹¹ Nowadays it has reached a point where in some instances it has become very difficult for the Ahl-e Haqq followers to recognize the correct versions . What seem to instigate this adversity is not the authenticity or the originality of the sacred texts but rather conflicts of authority and legitimacy. Although there is no evidence of a “correct version,” different families which sometimes live in different cities claim and pride themselves on the authenticity of their versions. The authentic and accurate version is a source of authority of one family over others.

Dialect is another reason for the existence of different versions of kalāms. As Armān noted, not all Ahl-e Haqq people know the Hawrāmī dialect; hence, individuals misunderstand or misinterpret words during translations which unintentionally yield different versions of sacred poems.¹²

Despite the existence of various versions of kalāms, they are still considered sacred because their importance mainly stems from the meaning they carry. It is the meanings of kalāms that affect humans. Words and sentences alone do not have divine power. If the Ahl-e Haqq insist on preserving these sacred poems in their exact form, it is because they want to save the meaning of these kalāms. Ārman noted that:

Each of these kalāms has meanings which cannot be understood just by reading and reciting stanzas and words. If you want to understand what these poems say, you have to search deep into your soul and find the esoteric meanings of the words. It is then that the door to understanding the divine secret will open and the result you are looking for will be revealed.¹³

Efficacy of kalām

After this conversation, I asked Armān if there is any specific kalām for a particular cause such as healing, and he replied:

No, because these poems are like conduits in connecting you with the realm of divinity. After that, it is your responsibility to look for the meanings, and that depends on your readiness and ability in understanding divine power. You can reach healing by repeating any sacred poem if your soul and body are ready to receive divine blessing.¹⁴

Furthermore, he stressed that not everybody would have the same result from the recitation of kalām. To better understand this matter, he explained it through a narrative:

Shāh Fazl-e Nabī was accompanied by three of his *murīds*.¹⁵ They only had a single lamb as a source for their daily rations. Anytime they run out of meat; they would slaughter the lamb and eat its meat. Shāh Fazl-e Nabi, who was their

morād, would manifest one of his *karāmāt*¹⁶ by reciting a kalām and hitting the lamb's bones with his cane, and the lamb would come back to life. Hence, due to Shāh Fazl's blessings, they had an infinite source of food. Once, Shāh Fazl left them for a while and when hunger overwhelmed them, they slaughtered the lamb and ate its meat. They then took a cane and recited the same kalām and did as their *morād* had done many times but nothing happened. They could not bring the lamb to life. When Shāh Fazl came back and saw that they had killed the lamb and ate its meat but were not be able to resurrect it, said: "did you think that whatever kalām you say counts as a zikr and will work? No, it does not function in this way. The word you recite has a different meaning in someone else's mouth. It has different energy based on who is reciting It."¹⁷

In other words, even if someone knows and utters the words, it is not certain that that person grasps the meaning and will receive the positive energy of kalām. The following example of a kalām entitled "Dasī Wīt Wila" serves to enlighten the significance of the narrative better:

*Dasī Wīt Wila (*2), Gyān Yuwit Shamāmah, Dusan mizgānī, Ay/Hay Bāwa Hayar Āmā, Yārān Mizgānī, Gyān Bāwa Hayar Āmā.*

There is A Flower in Your Hand (*2), [Divine] Life there is Also A Shamāmah (a fragrant kind of melon) in your Hand; [Divine] Friends Good News! Oh Bābā Haydar Came, [Divine] Comrades Good News! [Divine] Life Bābā Haydar Came."(Hooshmandrad 2004:244)

It would be difficult for outsiders to interpret this poem and understand its meaning. The interpretation is not easy for people who recite it either. This poem is about Bābā Haydar, who is the manifestation of one of the Haftan. As the poem illustrates, he is holding Gul (flower) in one hand and Shamāmah (a fragrant kind of melon) in the other hand of which both are also manifestations of the Haftan (244). However, there is no obvious indication as to what do each of the Haftan, Bābā Haydar, Gul, and Shamāma represents. Some researchers and Ahl-e Haqq scholars believe that Bābā Haydar is Dāwed, who is the manifestation of supernatural messenger Michael, who holds the role of a pathfinder in

Ahl-e Haqq culture and religion. They know him as a companion who will aid them to overcome difficulties and disasters. Also, they interpret that Shamāma and Gul are Binyāmin (a manifestation of Gabriel) and Pīr Musī (manifestation of recording Angel) respectively. As I was told, recalling these sacred figures through the recitation of this kalām will bring happiness and good feelings to the reciters. Nevertheless, there is uncertainty about the allocation of these symbols to their respected sacred characters. No one can be entirely certain about the actual meaning of this poem. Therefore it is open to various interpretations. More importantly, however, the interpretations of these sacred poems are not the focal point of attention for Ahl-e Haqq individuals. The energy that a recitation generates and brings to the circle is more significant than knowing which sacred characters are meant to be named in kalāms. Mehrāb Esrāfīlī notes that:

If people are ready for the presence of the Divine, the recitations will enchant angels and sacred spirits, drawing them to the circle. It does not matter whose name is recalled. In the end, it is the divine energy and blessings that are sought which you will receive by repeating the sacred poems. The literal meanings of the words are not as important as some people might think because once a person stops thinking about the meaning and starts repeating the poems, it is not about words anymore.¹⁸

Divine interventions and blessings are the most important part of recitations; other spirits and angels are just a conduit for connecting people to the divine realm.

Conclusion: Kalām and Music

The root of Ahl-e Haqq's music should be searched for in kalām and the way it is recited as a zikr. Kalām-khwān, an individual responsible for reciting kalām and leading the kalām group, uses kalām rhythm for playing tanbūr and reciting zikr. Significantly,

their rhythmic recitation of kalām does not resemble reciting Quran. With that understanding, Jean During believes that Ahl-e Haqq people have preserved this recitation method from their indigenous culture since the era before Islam (During 1999: 48). There are several studies about the techniques they use when playing tanbūr; however, because it is not relevant to this research I will not explain them here. The only important point which I should mention is that this rhythmic recitation is particularly suited for meditation, for forgetting one's physical existence and uncovering the spiritual realm.

It is not obligatory for the kalām-khwān to use a specific set of zikrs during ceremonies. Therefore he chooses the zikrs he wants to recite based on the circle's mood and people's interest. If some parts of kalāms are not suitable for the circle's feeling, he will replace them with other kalāms. Music and kalām complete each other in providing individuals with an opportunity for soul searching, inner cleansing, and inviting divine powers to permeate through and enlighten their existence and blossom. The Ahl-e Haqq believe that when these two essential elements are permeated together in a *Jam* ritual, as will be explained in the next chapter, they provide the best possible results in averting disasters and ailments. As they say in their poem:

Ā To Bowvāna Zikre Nāme Yār/Balā Part Maow Vīney Galāy Dār

You recite the zikr of yār's name; Disaster will be easily swept away from your pass like a leaf.

Chapter Four

The Jam and Healing rituals of Ahl-e Haqq

“Your sickness is from you, but you do not perceive it and your remedy is within you, but you do not sense it. You presume you are a small entity, but within you is enfolded the entire Universe. You are indeed the evident book, by whose alphabet the hidden becomes manifest. Therefore you have no need to look beyond yourself. What you seek is within you, if only you reflect.” ~ Alī ibn abi Taleb

After spending the whole morning of the first day of arrival touring Haj Nematollah Jeyhūn Ābādī’s shrine and talking to pilgrims, I was exhausted. The weather was mercilessly hot. To quench our thirst and rest our aching legs Armān suggested visiting Mehrāb Esrāfīlī at his house and refreshing our souls with some celestial music and Kalām.

After conversing for some time about Ahl-e Haqq history, kalām and music, Mehrāb extended his invitation to visit a Jamkhāne located on the first floor of his home. This Jamkhāne was well known among the followers as it had been used by Seyyed Khalīl Ālīnezhād on several occasions. To my surprise, the Jamkhāne was nothing more than a common traditional Iranian living room. Persian rugs covered the entire floor, and two sets of sofas were arranged around the living room. The walls were adorned with pictures of various landscapes and a few portraits of Alī, the first Shia Imam, Seyyed Khalīl Ālīnezhād and a rare drawing they claim to be that of Prophet Mohammad in his youth.

I was looking around the living room but could not feel any sacredness about the place; therefore, I asked Mehrāb if he would play his tanbūr and recite some kalām. Mehrāb and Armān looked at each other and exchanged eye contact as if Mehrāb was seeking Armān’s approval or maybe his blessing and then he left the living room and

returned with his tanbūr and sat on the floor. Armān sat on his left side and in order to be able to observe his performance, I sat in front of them. When Mehrāb started playing a piece of Ahl-e Haqq sacred music, I could sense the good feeling flourishing inside my soul but still could not feel the level of spirituality one is supposed to feel and associates with sacred spaces. After Mehrāb finished playing I said: “you recited a sacred kalām while playing tanbūr in a Jamkhāne that is believed to be a sacred place, however, as an audience I did not experience that beautiful and intense feeling I have heard about which awakens deep spiritual sentiments.” “Because you were not in *Jam*,” Mehrāb said. Armān then further explained that the Ahl-e Haqq’s sacred texts and music could only be effective during *Jam*. They possess their spiritual power during the ritual. In other words, it is the ritual that gives them spiritual powers. “And the place?” I asked. “The place also becomes sacred during the *Jam*. This sacred event transforms this living room into a sanctuary,” Armān replied.

Later that day when reminiscing about my experience at Mehrāb’s home, the following questions came to my mind: what actually occurs or is perceived to occur during *Jam* that draws the Ahl-e Haqq to hold this ritual in hopes of receiving a vast array of blessings and healing from the Divine? How can ritualistic actions performed in an altered space result in healing?

To answer these questions, I will ponder the connotative differences between cure and healing among the Ahl-e Haqq and how healing, which encompasses spiritual and physical states of mind and body, is distinguished from cure. Next, I will examine the role of *Jam* ritual in healing among the Ahl-e Haqq. I will elaborate on my understanding of how music and sacred text relate to the role of *Jam* in healing at Jamkhāne.

Vernacular Health Belief Systems

In the article “Folklore, Worldview, and Communication,” Barre Toelken notes that all societies and cultures have unique, intricate worldviews and systematic ways of seeing the world and defining reality which exist at all levels of perception and expression (Toelken 1975:266). These worldviews include “a group’s health-related attitudes, beliefs, and practices and frequently are referred to as health belief systems” (Andrews 2003:75). These health belief systems which vary from culture to culture lead to a multiplicity of different and sometimes idiosyncratic approaches to illness and health. Cultures create unique patterns of perceptions about diseases - their causes, cures, prevention methods – as well as understandings of total well-being. Different health belief systems can be found among various ethnic and religious groups both domestically and internationally. Despite the dominance of the scientific medicine, many non-biomedical health beliefs continue to flourish and grow in popularity all around the world (O’Connor 1995: xv).

Bonnie Blair O’Connor defines vernacular health belief systems as those which encompass the full range of healing modalities beyond the conventional Western allopathic, biomedical health system (O’Connor 1995:xv). In her book *Healing Traditions: Alternative Medicine and the Health Professions*, she addresses the following issues to illustrate common components of vernacular health belief systems:

how people define health and illness; how and why people believe they become sick; how they decide what to do about it; under whose care they decide to do which things; and what some of the implications of these beliefs and decisions are for health professionals in the conventional Western medical system. (xvi)

Hence, to understand a health belief system, detailed knowledge of its components and their relationships is crucial. Medical concepts such as sickness, healing, and what constitutes efficacy, vary among different health belief systems and even among participants within a particular system (Waldram, 2000:619). In her article, “The Efficacy of Traditional Medicine: Current Theoretical and Methodological Issues,” James Waldram argues that since different epistemologies and worldviews about health belief systems, and to the same extent, between people within a system, are not uniform, scholars should go back to fieldwork and re-explore those concepts the way they are understood within vernacular health systems (Ibid).

Historically, vernacular medicine has been viewed as a set of disparate ideas and practices that are randomly put together (O’Connor and Hufford 2005:16). This idea, however, comes from insufficient in-depth contextualized studies in the field (Ibid). In fact, vernacular medicinal belief systems such as those I examined among the Ahl-e Haqq, are coherent and complex systems that have been accumulated and organized through ages where its thoughts, actions, and contents have withstood the test of time through repetitive examinations and evaluations. Vernacular medicine often relies heavily on oral tradition and is mostly passed on through experience, example, observation, and apprenticeship. It does not follow specific formulations or instructions (O’Connor 1995:6). Since there are sometimes no visible displays of organized frameworks for practicing vernacular medicine, their existence is not always easily recognizable. Lack of deep understanding of healing traditions among a specific group will lead outsiders toward wrong perceptions of homogeneous beliefs about healing.

To cope with a variety of illnesses experienced throughout history, people have developed rules, methods, and sets of beliefs consistent with their cultural worldviews for defining and making sense of illness and health (Thorne 1993:1933). Since illnesses and beliefs about them are not isolated, to understand a disease, we need to understand the relationship between the disease and other cultural structures and analyze the deep integration of illness into the structure of society. Health belief systems articulate theories about disease and healing, with other important values and beliefs within a larger cultural framework of a society's beliefs, one of which is religion.

Religion has been closely associated with healing traditions throughout human history (O'Connor 1995:15). All religions deal with illness and health, although they vary in the "roles assigned to intervening material causes and to religious and medical personnel" (Hufford 1987:225). The need to use religious resources for healing and dealing with illness seems to be universal (226). Religious healing is not only involved with the physical dimension of human health but also includes spiritual dimensions as well. The interest in religious and spiritual healing in Western societies has been on the increase due to patients' feelings that physical treatments are not sufficient, and they need something to go beyond the "proper functioning of the physical body"(Koen 2009:5). Religious, spiritual, and metaphysical health beliefs and practices that have been excluded from conventional medicine practices, and are still actively maintained by people in their self-care and everyday lives, fall into the domain of vernacular health belief systems (O'Connor 1995:16).

Disease Versus Illness and Healing Versus Curing

Since vernacular health belief systems often involve both physical and spiritual dimensions of human health, they tend to address broader health concerns than conventional medicine. Biomedicine and vernacular health systems operate with different paradigms of illness, disease and healing (Mcguire 1988:5). In his book, *The Healer's Art: A New Approach to the Doctor-Patient Relationship*, Eric Cassell describes illness as “what the patient feels when he goes to the doctor” and disease as “what he has on the way home from the doctor's office”(1976:48). Therefore, in the scientific paradigm of modern medicine, diseases are seen “as abstract ‘things’ or independent entities which have specific properties and recurring identity in whichever setting they appear. That is, they are assumed to be universal in their form, progress and content” (Helman 1981:548). Illness, on the other hand, refers to “ the subjective response of the patient to being unwell: how he, and those around him, perceive the origin and significance of this event; how it affects his behavior or relationships with other people; and the steps he takes to remedy this situation”(Ibid). Disease, therefore, can occur in the absence of illness, and it is possible as well to have an illness without discernible disease (O'Connor 1995:28).

Vernacular health belief systems may also differentiate between “healing” and “curing.” Research has shown that even when people who seek help from folk healers do not see any improvement of their ailments and symptoms, they often report satisfaction and state that they feel better and may even say that they have been healed (Hufford 1997:552). While curing is physical, reducing the “signs and symptoms of disease at an anatomical level, healing, in contrast, is spiritual, intangible, and experiential, involving an integration of body, mind, and spirit” (Young and Koopsen 2005:15). Healing can include comfort, care, community and family relationships, life quality, restoration of

dignity, spiritual growth, acceptance, and even ultimate salvation (O'Connor 1995:28). Therefore, curing is concerned with the wholeness of body, whereas healing focuses on the wholeness of being (Skokan and Bader 2000:38).

The same distinction between healing and curing is found in the Persian language. *Darmān*, in Persian, which means “cure,” is about eliminating or alleviating the effects of the disease in a short period of time. *Shafā* on the other hand, which means “healing,” is concerned with the wholeness of *Tan* (body), *Aql* (mind), and *Ruh* (soul/spirit) and the way these elements constitute a balanced integration of a healthy person. It is only when both physical and spiritual dimensions of a person have been treated that it can be said that the individual is healed. However, even if the physical attributes of disease remain, healing may be experienced and subsequently achieved in the absence of a physical cure. As noted by David Hufford, the peace and satisfaction of having spiritual welfare and affirmation of belonging to the community may constitute the most personally valuable form of healing (Hufford 1997:552). Both of these issues are important forms of healings in the Ahl-e Haqq health belief system as well.

Healing Among Ahl-e Haqq

Based on my observation during fieldwork among the Ahl-e Haqq, there are two types of healing practices, individual healing and collective healing. Both types of healing practices are not isolated events and can occur in social and cultural contexts.

--Individual healing

Karāmāt, or non-prophetic miracles, a widely accepted ability in Islamic belief, is associated with clergies and pious individuals such as Pirs or Sheikhs in a community.

People believe that they possess special powers which can be used for healing among other things. There are many stories and personal experience narratives about individuals who had been healed by a Pīr or other eminent spiritual figures among the Ahl-e Haqq. I have collected many narratives and heard about personal experiences of people who were cured of cancer or resurrected from death through the blessings of holy figures.

There are also many accounts of individual healings using music. In these forms of healings, musical instruments replace holy dignitaries and symbolize Pīrs and sacred persons. Nakīsā Zolnurī narrated that on an occasion, he and his family visited a neighboring village named Dīnvar. Their hostess told them a story about her brother who had gotten very ill. He continued:

As his sister said, he was very sick, and they did not have access to a good doctor or a hospital. He had a fever for several days, and his situation was critical. His father sat next to him and played tanbūr until next daylight. In the morning he woke up without any trace of sickness. She told us that he had received the whole energy and blessing of his father's instrument and got healed. ¹

The narrative illustrates the overpowering involvement of the instrument and sacred sound in its healing process. The narrative also highlights the direct and personal relationship between the patient and the healer. There was no need for singing because the sacred sound of the instrument had enough influence during this particular healing session. Jean During asserts that human voice is fraught with subjectivity, whereas the instrument sound remains neutral and acts as a buffer between the healer and patient (During 2008:365). Although this narrative is a good example of using the sound of an instrument as a major element in healing, there are many instances where human voice is used for prayers in conjunction with music for more efficacies during healing processes.

Although the narrative shows personal and direct experience between patient and

healer in an event that seems isolated, it should be noted that this event exists within a broader cultural context, which creates a suitable environment that gives rise to healing. Some of these individual practices are highly contextual. Mehrāb Esrafīlī narrated a personal experience about his nephew:

Iman had an accident. They took him to a hospital in Sahneh. After initial examinations, they told his family that “we could not do anything more for him, and you should take him to a more equipped hospital in the capital city Kermanshāh.” I visited him in Kermanshāh’s hospital. He was in a very bad condition and had apoplexy. I saw him lying on a bed in CCU. *Aqā-ye² Ālīnezhad* was in exile³ during that time and was not allowed to come to Sahneh. When he heard the news, he immediately traveled towards Kermanshah and brought with him *niyaz* and *tabarok* from *Jam*. We asked the staff and the doctors to allow him inside the CCU room, but they refused. Then we tried to find people with higher connections and powers who could help us and after passing many obstacles, they finally allowed him inside. He immediately started purifying his body with *Niyāz*. *Niyāz* is a mixture of water and *nabāt* (crystalized sugar) that have been blessed in *Jam*. He purified his whole body with it, and when he came out of the room, Iman was healed and started to feel better.⁴

Although *Ālīnezhād*, a well-known holy figure, was responsible for purifying the patient’s body in preparation for it to receive holy blessing and healing from the Divine, the main element in the healing was the *nabāt* which had been blessed by *kalām* in the sacred gathering of a *Jam*. Therefore, the divine power of healing, in this case, comes from *Jam* context and the healer only acts as a medium for receiving the blessings and transferring them to the patient.

Despite numerous reports of individual healings among Ahl-e Haqq, what I found out during interviews is that they were secretive and protective about these events and reluctant to talk about the therapeutic abilities of individuals. It was after spending some time among the Ahl-e Haqq people that they became more candid, and provided more information. However, there still were some instances of Individual healing narratives

where I was forbidden from ever mentioning or broadcasting. When I asked Nakīsā Zolnurī about the reason behind this secrecy, he replied:

There are many accounts of healings during personal events or *Jams*. Someone was mute and got healed. Another one had cancer... several years ago, someone was dead and suddenly became alive. These accounts exist but should never be used as political leverage. Because if an individual publicizes that my father or grandfather has healed a blind person and started to gather people around him/herself for material gains and popularity, it becomes ugly and dirty. It is not spiritual anymore and not related to divinity. That is why we always want to keep these accounts secret.⁵

Thus, individual healing links the healer to both the community and the sacred realm.

However, the healer should not use the power for personal matters and mundane reasons.

The healer is only a medium, and as Armān explained being a medium does not mean that the healer holds a higher status than other people, it just means that he is in the right place at a right time which enables him to receive the power of healing. Using this power for personal gains is against the Ahl-e Haqq worldview, as they believe that Sultān (ultimate divine) is the only healer. It should be noted that there are no authoritative healing figures among the Ahl-e Haqq, or an occupation named as such. The reason stems from a deep belief that healing is solely unique to God and to regard a human being as a healer implies a sense of associating a mortal entity with God. Individuals can only mediate between the Divine and the ill person and to be qualified for this position, they should be physically and spiritually pure. Therefore, individuals who can perform healing rituals are Pīrs and select few famous spiritual figures of the Ahl-e Haqq.

The ability to heal debilitating illnesses and thwart misfortune forces begets power. This power increases when placed in the hands of individuals who, in Ahl-e Haqq's belief, acquire their authority through piety and pertinence to God. This ability

helps healers to gather followers and form or transform social roles as leaders of their community and their social network. As Nakīsā implied during our interview, Ahl-e Haqq Pīrs and spiritual leaders are against idolizing of a person by groups of people because, for one it is against their beliefs, and secondly they are extremely cautious about spreading these narratives outside their community in fear of negative implications these narratives can instill in average people about the validity and authenticity of their belief.

The second type of healing, which is collective healing, constitutes the core of my research. This topic will be discussed in the following section.

--Collective Healing

According to Armān, although the Ahl-e Haqq do not consider themselves Sufis and Dervishes, their beliefs and practices have been influenced by them throughout history, primarily because of their geographic proximity. Hence, there are similarities of health beliefs between both groups which are mostly based on Islamic worldview about wellness and illness. God stands at the basis of Islamic religion, and without God, nothing can exist. God is the original being and is alone infinite. He constitutes the integrity of all existence, particularly human, both individually and socially (Rahman 1998:12).

Several Quranic key terms relate to human wellness. One of the most important terms is *imān* which means “faith.” Without faith, as it appears in Quran, there can be no healing. Healing is peculiar of people that have faith in God. When an individual has faith, the other fundamental concept which is *taqwā*, meaning “piety” or “fear of God” will flourish in that person’s heart. *Taqwā* comes from the root “wa-qa-ya” which means “protection” or “support.” Having *taqwā*, therefore, means that when individuals have

faith, they observe self-restraint where the fear of God will protect them from carrying out deeds against his almighty. When people obey God's law, their hearts will be purified, and according to Islamic traditional medicine, a person that has a pure and healthy heart can be healed spiritually, which in turn leads to physical healing.

Unlike Islamic beliefs according to which individuals must engage in strict religious routines to purify their body and soul, Sufis emphasize inner development and soul searching to achieve salvation (Rahman 1998:12). They do, however, alongside the Islamic healing belief, uphold the main principle that God is the only true healer. In contrast, Sufis worship God not out of fear and punishment, but go beyond this notion to praise and pray to God without any extrinsic motivations. The following example illustrates the Sufis' prayer to God, where it surpasses all physical and emotional motivations, even love. Rabi'a Al-Adawiya's address to God in the following verses demonstrates the core idea of worshiping God among Sufis:

I love Thee with two loves: a selfish one and one of which Thou [alone] art worthy.

The selfish love makes me oblivious of all that is not Thou and causes me to think only of Thee.

As for the love of which Thou [alone] art worthy,

Thou raisest the veils for me so that I may see Thee.

In neither love I any merit, for the praise for both loves is wholly Thine. (Knysh 2010:31)

For them, the greatest goal and the sole purpose of life are obedience and service to God in the hope of earning his appeasement and reunification with the beloved.

Therefore, in this case, the separation from the beloved is the ailment. The Sufi faith is not defined in the context of Islamic law and beliefs, which is mind-centric but rather is a heart-centered faith based on deep gnosis. They work on polishing the heart and getting

rid of its figurative rust in order to purify their souls. Once they achieve this level, the body is prepared for the ultimate prize of divine presence and unification with the beloved.

While Sufi doctrine and practice are based on total trust of God and relying solely on him for healing, the Ahl-e Haqq people depend on both prayers and medical treatments and intervention procedures. However, their primary concern is the prevention of illness through soul purification, thereby achieving well-being. Meditation and prayers are therefore fused into music for healing practices. People contextualize texts in specific ways at particular social settings (Myrvold 2016:5). For the purpose of healing, the Ahl-e Haqq use music and their sacred texts in the context of *Jam* ritual, which, based on their beliefs, gives healing efficacy to music and prayer. Armān emphasized many times and on several occasions that the sacred texts and tanbūr are ineffective without *Jam*. They only possess the power of healing, because they are used in this specific ritual. As he explained, “it is the hand of *Jam* that heals and has the power of healing, not the tanbūr; tanbūr and kalāms are just mediums for the transfer of healing powers.”⁶

Before explaining the significance of *Jam* in Ahl-e Haqq daily life, it is better to become familiar with *Jam* ritual and *Jamkhāne*, the space where *Jam* takes place.

Jamkhāne

After a drive of almost five hours through the night from Tehran, Armān, my husband and daughter and I reached the city of Sahneh. My aim on this trip was to visit a *Jamkhāne* that belonged to Armān’s family. It was 6:50 in the morning when we arrived. Shops were still closed. The city was quiet except for a few people who were walking

around and going to buy traditional bread. We could smell the enticing aroma of freshly baked bread in the air as we drove through the streets. Armān guided us towards a bakery shop and a small market where we stopped to buy bread and groceries for breakfast. We then continued driving for another thirty minutes until we reached a small village named Qazvineh. From my seat in the car, I noticed many farms and fruit trees which were an indication of people's occupation in this region. We passed through tight and difficult alleys and drove until a big blue door appeared in front of us. Armān stepped out and opened the door, and we drove our car inside. When I stepped out of the car, a burst of fresh and somewhat dusty air (the dust had raised from the unpaved road as we drove in) awoke my senses.

As Armān closed the gate, I sensed a feeling of total separation from the outside world. The environment was peaceful, and I could hear the singing of birds mixing in with the sound of the early morning breeze whizzing through the leaves, accompanied by the subtle sound of a water spring under an ancient mulberry tree. Ah, what an inspiration for creating beautiful pieces of music. It seemed that music was in the air and in harmony with the human soul.

About ten yards in front of the gate, was an old abandoned building that once was the home of Armān's grandfather. The house's broken windows and doors suggested that it had not been used for a long time. The foundation of this adobe building was made of wood, a common practice in rural areas. On the right side of the building a spring was overshadowed by two ancient trees. It created a pleasant place to relax and rest, during the long, hot summer days. Legend has it that Seyyed Farzī, a well-known spiritual master who lived during the eighteenth century, came to this place and stayed for a while.

It did not take long before a spring started to flow from the soil. Although Armān said that he had not found any historical record for this matter, people who visit this Jamkhāne believe deeply in the sacredness of this spring. The spring water was coming out of a pipe and was clean, pure and cold.

A walnut and a mulberry tree had grown tightly beside each other and seemed ancient. I asked Armān about their age, but he did not have any record nor could recollect any stories about them. Both trees were full of fruits, and Seyyed Farzī's family picked these fruits for their daily use. The combination of the sacred spring water and both sacred mulberry and walnut trees along with fresh breeze and smell of fresh cut crops gave the space a spiritual feeling.

On the left side of the old house, was what seemed to be an extension to the old building which they use as Jamkhāne. I should note that it is not necessary to build a Jamkhāne from the ground up as a particular place for *Jam* ritual. Any place can be suitable for performing *Jam* as long as it is physically and spiritually clean. Until recently, almost all Seyyed's houses included a room for *Jam* ritual. A *Jam* ritual can also be performed in an open space.

Seyyed Farzī's Jamkhāne is almost two hundred and fifty years old, raised from the ground by the measure of three steps. The exterior façade of the house is made of plain concrete without any patterns. A dark green metal door in front is one of three entrance doors to the Jamkhāne. The necessary lighting for inside comes from four big windows built into the walls. Armān unlocked the door and removed his shoes, which is a religious custom among many Iranians, expressing their deep respect for the Divine or the holy person to which that place is dedicated. In addition, people of the Ahl-e Haqq sit

on the carpet during *Jam* ritual, and it is considered highly disrespectful to step on prayer carpets with shoes.

Before entering the Jamkhāne, Armān prostrated himself in front of the door and kissed the floor at the entrance. He went inside, and I followed right behind him. The strong smell of wool coming from the Persian rugs and the heat inside the building indicated that Jamkhāne had not been in use for several days. The room was square shaped and the floor covered with two big Persian rugs with red the dominant color. The walls were colored in white with the lower one-third covered with tiles to prevent it from becoming dirty, since people lean against the wall while sitting. This entrance room is intended for the elderly men as they are not permitted to participate in the main ritual and enter the *Jam*. To the right, was the main room in which *Jam* rituals take place. The room was separated from the entrance room by a plain wooden door. As is typical of Iranian architecture, the top section of the door and the doorframe were adorned with pieces of glass to allow more light into the room. Long green heavy fabric curtains draped the doorway. While during this visit the curtain was opened and knotted to make movement easier, Armān said that during the ritual they close the curtain to protect the privacy of the *Jam*. As we moved inside, Armān mentioned that based on the Ahl-e Haqq kalāms, *Jam* is united, and although it is one ritual for all attendees in Jamkhāne, there should, however, be three different rooms: one for men where the main ritual is held, one for elderly men, and one for women and children.

The main room had a long rectangular shape. Armān prostrated himself one more time before entering the room and started walking toward the middle. Persian carpets furnished the floor and to protect them from dust and sunlight; they were covered with

flat tapestry carpets.⁷ The lower halves of the walls were covered in gray tiles all around



Figure 12: Armān describing *Jam* ritual in Jamkhāne's main room (Photo by Author)

the room as in the outer rooms. Two big windows were draped by thick green curtains. The wall was so thick that it had created a sizable niche in front of the windows. A ceiling fan was in the center of the ceiling and there were two chandeliers on the opposite sides. There were two fluorescent light fixtures on the wall. The wall was covered with portraits and photos of important Ahl-e Haqq figures and also Armān's grandfather and his youngest uncle who had passed away. In the middle of the left side wall, was a big and long area covered with dark green tiles adorning calligraphy inscriptions of sacred kalām. Names of Sultān Sahāk and other holy spirits could also be seen on the wall. Further, some items from dervish beliefs such as *kashkul* and *tabarzin* were hung on the wall. Above them hung a long robe created out of seventy-two threads symbolizing the seventy-two Pīrs who have spiritual abilities and are sacred figures among Ahl-e Haqq.

At the end of the room, was a small door which led to a dark room they call *Māla*

Bochkala. Māla Bochkala literally means “small house” and refers to a dark, narrow small room with no lights, a space which they believe Seyyed Farzī used for the ritual



Figure 13: Māla Bochkala’s door (Photo by Author)

of *chelle neshastan*. Chelle Neshastan, which means “sitting for forty days,” is a ritual where individuals stay secluded in a small dark room for forty days, concentrating only on praying and reciting kalām to purify their souls and gain high spiritual knowledge through their hearts. There was a picture above the doorway to the room that is believed to be of Alī, the first Shia Imam. Below that picture, hung a calligraphy frame with the following inscription: *Sultān-e Haqiqat* which means “The Lord of truthfulness”.⁸

I went inside Māla Bochkala by bowing my head. It is customary in Iran to build the door frames of holy places low to force whoever wants to enter the place to bow their heads as a sign of respect. When standing inside Māla Bochkala, there is space for one other person to stand next to you. I had to bow my head all the time during my presence in there because of the low ceiling. The place was totally dark, so to see what is inside I opened the door, but the dim light from outside hardly helped. I had to turn on my cell

phone light to be able to see around the room. As Armān told me, this place was originally built out of wood and thatch. To protect the place, they later used concrete and



Figure 14: Māla Bochkala's door (Photo by Author)

tiles to cover the surface, but the foundation is still wooden. The smell of damp fresh soil filled the room. The floor was covered with a Persian rug that was larger than the room, so it was rolled up from both sides. Two pieces of fabric were hung from a long wooden stick, like a flag: one green that was the symbol of Seyyed Farzī and the other white, which symbolized Sheikh Amir who is the manifestation of Pīr Benyamīn. The green

fabric overlaid the white one which indicated that Seyyed Farzī's rank is higher than Sheikh Amir.

Based on tradition, women should cover their hair when entering religious places and shrines. This tradition is not limited to Islam, as other religions such as Zoroastrianism have the same custom for both men and women. I was not sure about Ahl-e Haqq belief in this matter; nevertheless I covered my hair with a colorful scarf before entering the Jamkhāne. When inside Māla Bochkala, Armān informed me that it is essential to cover the head inside this place; it is also necessary to belt a piece of fabric around the waist, which is Kurdish customary dress. Importantly he noted that covering the head is not limited to women, and men should also cover their head in Jamkhāne and during *Jam*. They place a woven hat on their heads and cover the remaining part with a long piece of fabric or *sarband*. Sarbands can be in any color.

Armān started slowly walking backward to leave Māla Bochkala, which is another religious tradition. He prostrated himself one more time as he exited the doorway, kissed the ground, and we moved towards the first room we entered. From the left corner of the children and elderly men's room, we entered another room that was allocated to women. The room was one step higher than the other room and was simple, without any tiles covering the walls. The floor was covered with the same type of rugs, but there were no pictures of holy figures on the walls. A large window letting in the sunlight made the room very bright. Next to the window was an entrance door so women would have easier separate access to this room during busy and overcrowded ritual events. It was evident from the stockpile of washed cooking pots and accessories on a

table cloth in the middle of the floor and the smell of cooking oil and food that filled the room that Nazrī⁹ had been cooked recently.¹⁰

From the four gas cylinders which were placed in a corner, I gathered that they cook their sacred food on gas stoves and not open fire. The smell of food led me to the kitchen area located on the right side at the end of the room.



Figure 15: stockpile of washed cooking pots and utensils (Photo by Author)

The kitchen was bright, and the bottom two-thirds of the walls were covered with purple triangular shaped tiles. The floor was tiled in beige. The combination of colors of wall and floor tiles made this room very lively. There were several big pots on the right side of the kitchen which are used for cooking rice and meat. The kitchen area was clean; to prevent dirt from contaminating the area, five pairs of slippers were placed at the entrance of the kitchen for people to wear while inside.

Seyyed Farzī's Jamkhāne, like several others I visited during my trip, was simple, with no specific mosaic artworks and decorations on display. This simplicity is not a

common theme in important Shia shrines. What makes Jamkhāne a sacred place for healing are neither the location nor the environment, but the *Jam* ritual itself. *Jam* is sacred, and wherever it occurs, it bestows its sacredness to that place as well. To better understand why this ritual holds such an important status among the Ahl-e Haqq, one must become familiar with the ritual concept. The following section is an explanation of *Jam* ritual.



Figure 16: Armān describing the cooking procedures in front of the kitchen (Photo by Author)

The following maps show the landscape of the area and the building plan of Jamkhāne:

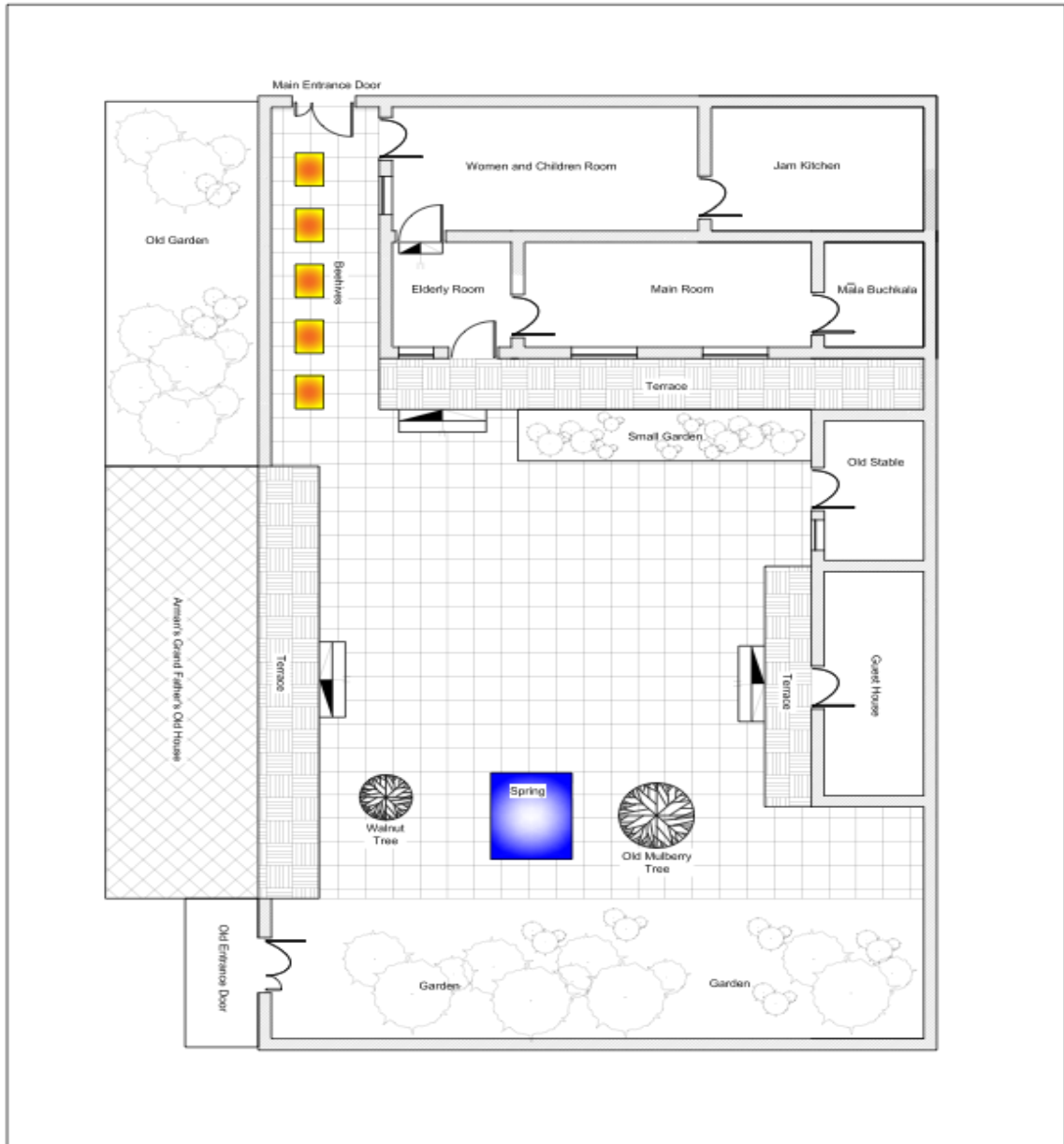


Figure 17:Jamkhāne floor map

A Note About Ethnography of Jam Ritual

When starting this research about Ahl-e Haqq people, I was warned that there would be many obstacles and restrictions, both as an outsider and as a woman, concerning engaging in religious practices and rituals. Fortunately, however, Ahl-e Haqq people welcomed me into their community with kindness and provided assistance whenever requested. The Ahl-e Haqq of Sahneh opened their door to almost all of their practices except one, the *Jam* ritual. Being an outsider had the greatest impact on their decision for not allowing me inside a *Jam* circle. The reason for this decision is their extreme belief in the sacredness of *Jam* and their concern for my lack of knowledge about the customs related to the ritual. I was not able to join a women's circle as well for the same reason. Another obstacle was the customary exclusion of women from the ritual's main room. I do, however, believe that one important reason for not permitting me or any outsider, regardless of their gender, to take part in *Jam* visually and physically, was Pīr's uncertainty about my spiritual condition and energy. The Ahl-e Haqq wholeheartedly believe that any negative energy and skepticism will affect the whole ritual and because *Jam* is a collective prayer ritual, one person with negative energy will exclude all others from receiving blessings and good feelings.

Therefore the following information about the *Jam* ritual comes from two sources: Armān's detailed description, and personal participation in a similar ritual in different spatial and temporal contexts. During my visit to Jamkhāne, Armān described the ritual in detail by pointing to different areas and demonstrating participants' arrangements and movements. While staying in Sahneh, Armān arranged a meeting to visit a Khaksār's *Khānqāh* in Kermānshāh and with the permission of their Pīr, I was able

to attend and experience their ritual, as this branch of Khaksār are not as sensitive and restrictive about nonbelievers' participation as are the Ahl-e Haqq.

I had permission from the Ahl-e Haqq to attend the ritual to sit in the elderly room and listen to their sacred music during *Jam* and experience the feeling and the blessing that comes from listening to the sacred music, albeit from a distance, since there is a belief that people who are not able or cannot participate in *Jam* rituals can still receive blessings by concentrating on the ritual and establishing a connection with *Jam*.

Jam Ritual

The most important ritual and the beating heart of the Ahl-e Haqq religion is *Jam* or the ritual of food blessing. *Jam* is a religious obligation for all Ahl-e Haqq people. By uttering sacred kalāms and playing music during ritual performances, the participants prepare the circle's ambiance for the presence of holy spirits and the divine king. During the ritual, the *Jam* circle and the site in which it takes place transform into a sacred divine realm with supernatural powers.

Jam or *Jam'* in Persian means "gathering," but among the Ahl-e Haqq, it denotes gatherings of sacredness or divinity. Hooshmandrad points out that *Jam* stands for Jamshīd, which is one of the manifestations of Sultān. Thus, *Jam* would stand for the "presence of Sultān" (2004:32). The ultimate goal of *Jam* ritual, therefore, is the presence of the Divine. The word *Jam* carries a spiritual weight and its literal meaning, "[Divine] gathering," implies the potentiality of gaining spiritual powers through the circle of three or more people in the *Jam* ritual.

During our first interview, when I asked Armān to explain the way of practicing *Jam*, his eyes shined. He stared into the distance with a big smile on his face. It seemed that he was reliving good memories and feelings he had experienced during *Jam*. He had said that it would be more comprehensible if the explanation occurs within Jamkhāne. When we were at Seyyed Farzī's Jamkhāne, and after exploring the place, Armān started explaining the ritual in the main room:

There should be at least three people to constitute a *Jam*. Traditionally only Ahl-e Haqq men can participate in *Jam*, and those individuals who have cut, shaved or trimmed their mustache are forbidden from participation. The attendees should be pure both in mind and body. They have to cover their heads and gird their waists to show their respect, readiness, and willingness to serve the Divine and his creatures. They form a circle sitting down, symbolizing the equality of all Ahl-e Haqq and the presence of divine essence at the heart of circle. All individuals are alike, and no one is considered higher than others because everyone is equal in this circle.

Three individuals manage the ritual. Someone from the Sādāt family should be present in *Jam* because the blessing of foods is central in this ritual and the presence of a Seyyed for food blessing is essential. He sits close to the door. There should also be a *khadīm* or “[spiritual] servant” present. He stands in *Jam* and is responsible for bringing *Nazr* into the room, and in helping with the distribution of the blessed food. The third person is a *Khalifeh* or caliph who sits next to the Seyyed on his right side and is responsible for the distribution of the blessed food. Other than these three sitting arrangements, there is no particular order of sitting for people attending the *Jam*. Because of the sacredness of this ritual, all individuals must purify their body and mind before entering the *Jam*. A person who wants to enter the room must prostrate himself in front of the door, and kiss the ground. Only then may he enter the room. He then proceeds from the right side and starts to kiss participants' right hands as a symbol of humbleness. When he finds an empty place, he kneels down.¹¹

Food holds significant importance in this ritual. I will shed some light on the food and ingredients used for blessed food.

Nazr: Niāz and Qorbānī and its Relation to Music

While daily worship is an obligation for all Muslims in Islamic orthodoxy, Nazr is Ahl-e Haqq's form of worship. Although Ahl-e Haqq's beliefs have some common features with Sufis and other religions, the vernacular beliefs which have been vital in the existence and survival of this religion are unique. Nazr or food offering is one of the beliefs that is highly valuable to the Ahl-e Haqq and is a core element of the *Jam* ritual. Preparation of food and offering it to *Jam* for equal distribution among people shows the deep belief of communal life among Ahl-e Haqq.

Nazr or offering can be classified into two broad categories: *Niyāz* and *qorbānī*. *Niyāz* does not include animal sacrifice. It can consist of anything edible, from fruits, to crystalized sugar, to nuts. The only exception is cooked food. *Qorbānī*, on the other hand, can either be bloodless or of blood sacrifices. Any animal may be used for blood sacrifice; the only condition is that it should be male, such as a bull, goat, or a rooster. Bloodless sacrifices usually consist of pomegranate, watermelon, and most importantly *gerde*, which is an especial bread made from flour, sugar, and ghee. By cutting the top of the pomegranate or cutting a small piece of bread by knife, the Ahl-e Haqq symbolically perform the sacrifice act.

These Nazrs are usually prepared in times when Ahl-e Haqq feel the necessity and the urgency of the power of *Jam* for divine intervention. A kalām attributed to Sultan Sahāk is the main reason for Ahl-e Haqq carrying out *niyaāz* and *qorbānī*. In the kalām, Sultān Sahāk states: "if five or more individuals gather in a circle and perform *Niyāz* and *qorbānī*, I will be in this circle as well." (Armān) As this kalām indicates, Sultān will be present in the *Jam*, and his presence gives spiritual energy to the ritual. The spiritual

energy that emanates at the *Jam* during the preparation and the distribution process of Nazr is transmitted to those who eat the blessed food. Therefore, the blessed food becomes sacred and is kissed before eating it in good faith.

Women are responsible for cooking blood qorbānī and baking bread. These days, according to Armān, they buy the bread from trusted bakeries even though it is still preferable to bake them inside Jamkhāne. The food they prepare is rice and boiled meat without adding spices and other ingredients. Food is Mohr (sealed) and should not be tasted and consumed until a Seyyed breaks the seal and blesses the food. Blessed food is sacred and should not be thrown away. Everyone should respect the Nazr, and if it was necessary, they should bury the excess and unused portions.

When I inquired about the role of tanbūr playing in *Jam*, Armān explained that music is not a required part of the ritual, but since music along with kalām elevates the spiritual atmosphere of the ritual, they prefer to chant kalām with the entrancing sound of tanbūr. When he realized I was looking for a more concise answer about the relationship between *Jam* and music, he added:

Music holds an important place among the Ahl-e Haqq people. Eating Nazr and playing sacred music are two poles of Ahl-e Haqq religion and both of them are sacrificial rituals; the former is physical and tangible, and the latter is spiritual and with sound. Nazr is offered to God and in return, individuals receive blessings and a sense of good feelings in their hearts and souls. Music when played for divine and spiritual entities, supplements kalāms and invigorates blessings and feelings. Music helps food become satiated with spiritual energy, and eating this blessed food will transmit all of these positive energies to individuals. Music is sacred and has high spiritual power. When it is performed in *Jam*, it works as a conduit for invisible entities to join the *Jam*, participate in the ritual and spread their blessings and mercies in this circle.¹²

Accordingly, music empowers the blessed food to prepare the atmosphere for the presence of divine Essence and spiritual entities. This presence brings spiritual gifts for

participants, gifts which can include inner calmness and peace and an increase in religious faith and enthusiasm, as well as wellness and healing.

Hearing is the Most Important Sense During Jam

In most Sufi sects, there is a strong belief that women obscure the presence of heart in prayers. They therefore forbid women from participating in prayers and rituals, although there are several accounts of high-ranking Sufi women like Rābia al-Adawiyya, who achieved rare spiritual eminence (Karamustafa 2007:3). Armān's response about the prohibition of women's participation in *Jam* ritual was that in the first *Jam* ritual, Khatun Ramzbār, who is the mother of Sultan Sahāk and one of the Haftan, did not participate in the ritual and instead asked Pīr Mustafā to represent her. It then became custom for women not to take part in the ritual. I asked Armān: "so how can women receive blessings?" He said:

Women are not involved in the main ritual but *Jam* is for all, and everyone can receive its blessing and energy. Although presence in the ritual gives individuals a wonderful and spiritual feeling, it does not mean that someone who is not present physically cannot be part of *Jam* and its blessing. Women can attend the ceremony by staying in the allocated room and be part of the ritual and receive its blessing by listening to the recitation of kalām and the music performance in the ritual room. The presence of the soul is much more important than the physical presence.¹³

In Sufi ideology, sound is a symbol of power. Ali Hujwiri, a prominent Persian Sufi, emphasizes that hearing is superior to sight.

God has sent Apostles with true evidences, but belief in His Apostles does not become obligatory until the obligatoriness of knowing God is ascertained by means of hearing. It is hearing, then, that makes religion obligatory; and for this reason the Sunnis regard hearing as superior to sight in the domain of religious obligation (*taklif*). If it be said that vision of God is better than hearing His word, I

reply that our knowledge of God's visibility to the faithful in Paradise is derived from hearing: it is a matter of indifference whether the understanding allows that God shall be visible or not, inasmuch as we are assured of the fact by oral tradition. Hence hearing is superior to sight. (Newell 2007:4)

This predominance of hearing to sight can also be seen in Ahl-e Haqq ideology.

When I enquired about the ability to experience the *Jam* ritual and its good feeling without physically participating in a circle, Armān explained that I should concentrate on the prayers and music by listening to them with my heart. He emphasized that:

You need to be present in *Jam*, but this presence does not necessarily have to be physical. When you know that there is going to be a *Jam* ritual held in a particular place and at given time, you should focus on your positive energy and concentrate on the *Jam*. *Jam* is so powerful that it will absorb your energy and replace it with blessings.¹⁴

Later, I found out that there are Ahl-e Haqq people who do not participate in *Jam* rituals but find their connection with *Jam* and receive blessings for what they had wished. Mehrāb Esrafīlī noted that there are some indications in several kalāms that participants should close their eyes and empty their minds of all worldly desires and physical needs during *Jam*. The principle reason for simple building designs of Jamkhāne is to eliminate any physical distractions that might hinder the absolute devotion required to feel the sound of the divine realm.

Healing During the Jam

“*Ka’beye man khāsen na sang na barden/ safāye Jame Yār Davāye kolle Darden*”

“My *Ka’ba* is unique, neither it is made of stone, nor clay / Purity of the *Jam* in the presence of the [Divine] Friend is the medicine for every single ailment.”

Armān recited this Ahl-e Haqq famous and popular kalām¹⁵ to emphasize the role of the Divine in healing. What the kalām says is that in contrast to Islam that requires its followers to face Ka’ba (the house of Allah) for praying and worshiping God, Ahl-e Haqq individuals do not believe in a specific place attributed to the Divine, as God like a friend, can be reached everywhere. It continues that one of the moments where the presence and consequently the purity of the Divine can be felt is during the *Jam* were his presence in the circle is medicine for all human ailments and pains. This and other similar kalām are the indications that the Ahl-e Haqq strongly believe *Jam* ritual can heal them from all pains and ailments. The aim of *Jam* is purification from worldly matters and spiritual salvation through the presence of Sultān (the Divine).

As I did not have permission to participate in *Jam* ritual and only was able to listen to the sound of music and zikr alone and outside of the circle, I asked Armān to explain the ritual in totality. The following is a description of the ritual based on Armān’s experience and observations.

When the Khādem announces the beginning of *Jam* and while he is standing in the middle of the circle, he faces the seyyed and says: “Avval Ākhher Yār.” The sentence, which means “first and last is [Divine] friend,” reminds the participants that they all come from God, and eventually they return to him. Therefore all are united in their life journey. After this announcement, the circle of *Jam* becomes “closed” and the *Jam* metamorphoses into a sacred space. Participants are forbidden any movement; no one can leave or enter the room. They sit kneeling down and remain in the same position during the entire ritual. Khādem is the only person who can move because of the nature of tasks he has to perform. Whenever he wants to sit, he kneels down on one knee and he

places his right hand on the ground whenever possible, to assist in the continual flow and transition of spiritual energy in *Jam*. When the circle is closed, Khādem enters the circle holding an ewer of water in his right hand and an empty bowl in his left. Then, in a counter-clockwise rotation, he stands in front of each participant starting from Seyyed and pours water on their hands as they go through the motion of a symbolic hand washing ritual. The motion consists of washing their hand from the tip of their fingers to their elbows. It is greatly important to cleanse and purify the hands before touching blessed food and offerings. It also is a symbolic act of denouncing all worldly thoughts from their minds during their presence at the ritual.

Then, khādem brings a table cloth and spreads it in the middle of the room. He then proceeds to bring the Nazr from the kitchen area and place it in front of Seyyed. The Seyyed, in turn, starts to bless the food with prayers, and when he is finished, khādem places the blessed food in front of khalifeh. With Seyyed's permission, khalifeh starts to divide the Niyāz or qorbāni to equal portions. These portions are called *bash*. Then once again Seyyed recites prayers on these portions which in effect break the seals on the blessed food and it becomes ready for distribution. With the help of khādem, the food is distributed among the participants. The first portion belongs to Sultān Sahāk, whom Ahl-e Haqq believe is present in *Jam*. Interestingly, tanbūr, which is present in *Jam* for music performances, also has its portion of the blessed food.¹⁶The rest of the portions are put aside for those waiting outside the main room. The last portion is for the khādem. Holding their portion of blessed food with both hands, they wait until distribution is completed. The completion of the distribution process is announced by khādem when he enunciates “Avval Akhār Yār.” After a final prayer, Seyyed gives permission for eating.

When participants finish eating, khādem removes the tablecloth and cleans up the room and one more time brings the ewer and the bowl and repeats the hand washing process. The Ahl-e Haqq believe that from the point when individuals hold Nazr in their hands, the blessings of the food flow in their body, and in order not to waste any of these blessings through touching mundane materials, they must wash their hands after eating blessed food. After the hand washing ritual, Khādem brings a single bowl of water which all participants should drink from, even if they are not thirsty. This water is a representation of holy water which springs out near Baba Yadegar's shrine and is believed to have supernatural and healing powers. In the end, khādem and the participants kiss each others' outer right hand in a display of mutual respect and gratitude.

After the food blessing ceremony, kalāms accompanied by music are chanted by kalām-khwān. Kalām-Khwān who sits next to Seyyed knows the kalām by heart and chants them while playing tanbūr. Kalāms are the only spoken words during the ritual, and the sacred repertoires of tanbūr music are the only music allowed in the *Jam*. During a *Jam* ritual, which may last anywhere from twenty minutes to several hours based on the amount of offerings, some participants experience extreme feelings of euphoria and ecstasy from listening to kalāms and music.

It should be noted that Ahl-e Haqq music is not created only for aesthetic purposes. In her book *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali*,¹⁷ Regula Qureshi identifies three basic functions of Qawwali:

- 1)Qawwali serves to generate spiritual arousal.
 - 2)Qawwali serves to convey a text message of mystical poetry.
 - 3)Qawwali serves to satisfy listeners' diverse and changing spiritual requirements.
- (Qureshi 1986:60)

Music played during a *Jam* ritual also serves those three functions. Playing sacred music generates spiritual arousal and conveys the hidden messages in sacred poems, fulfilling the Ahl-e Haqq's diverse spiritual requirements. Although all of these functions are significant, spiritual arousal is paramount because it detaches listeners from worldly life and opens a door or a gateway to an invisible "other world." It is in this world that the Ahl-e Haqq's communion with the Divine takes place and the receiving of blessings and well-being becomes possible. The relationship between a health seeker and the Divine can be described as a relationship between a psychiatrist and a patient: an accord based on trust and obedience. To be in a session with the Divine, his presence needs to be invoked through imagination, a condition best achieved through the unification of music and sacred poems in a particular social ambiance.

A day after the *Jam* ritual, on our way back to the guest house in Seyyed Farzī's Jamkhāne, I asked Armān: "I still need more explanation about how music can bring someone closer to the Divine, and how one starts feeling cured of an ailment?" Armān began to repeat the whole *Jam* concept from the beginning, but he could sense that I was not convinced. He suddenly asked me a question: "Last night, when you heard the kalām accompanied with music, how did you feel?" I replied:

I just felt a strange sensation; I felt like my blood was boiling and my whole body was on fire. I did not have control of my hands and started clapping spontaneously. After a while, I could not think of anything, it was just music in my head, and nothing else to think about. At that moment, I just felt the rhythm... I felt... I just can't explain it....

Armān, who seemed appeased with my answer, asked: "But how did you feel after the *Jam*?" "I felt relieved!" I replied. "Wonderful!" he said jubilantly. "But does everyone

experience the same feeling?” I asked. He said: “No, each person will have his/her particular feeling; what is most important is having good feelings, feelings that help your general well-being!” He nodded his head in a positive and satisfying way.

Conclusion

A common characteristic of vernacular health belief systems is that, unlike conventional health belief systems that only address symptoms or treat proximate causes of sickness, they deal with critical ultimate causes (O’Connor 1995:27). The Ahl-e Haqq believe that causes of all types of pains and ailments are separation from the Beloved, who is the only source of well-being and ultimate healing. To be relieved from all pains and ailments, people should shorten the distance between themselves and the Beloved. Through constant remembrance of God in one’s heart, individuals can reduce the distance between themselves and the beloved and receive more healing blessings, and eventually eliminate the ultimate cause of illnesses by becoming one with him.

However, there remained an unanswered question. Why is the *Jam* ritual so important in the healing process? During an interview with Mehrāb Esrāfilī, and after finishing recording pieces of sacred music, we took a break and started drinking tea. After a few sips of tea, I asked him for an explanation about healings during tanbūr performances. He quickly answered:

“I would not say during tanbūr performances! Healings have occurred many times during *Jam* rituals, but the music was not the cause of these healings. I strongly believe that divine blessings are the cause of healings and not the music.”
“Then why is music so important and why all the enigma and secrecy about sacred tanbūr repertoires among the Ahl-e Haqq?” I continued asking.
“We believe that during *Jam*, playing tanbūr will instigate the immediate appearance of the spirits of three of the Haftans. Now someone should have the

vision to see them in the *Jam*. When three spiritual entities are present in a ritual, something will happen for sure; good feelings, healings, something! There is a *kalām* that the Ahl-e Haqq recite while playing *tanbūr*. In this chanting, they call upon Dāwed, one of the Haftan, and invite him to join the *Jam*. Some of the elders acknowledge that during a *Jam* ritual, when *Kalām-Khwān* was inviting Dāwed by reciting his name, participants could hear the word ‘yes’ as an answer when all of them were silent... It seems that Dāwed or an angel had responded to the participants’ invitation for being present in that ritual. It is our problem and shortcoming for not perceiving their answers. At this extraordinary moment, everything is possible, even healing.”

“And music?” I asked.

“Music helps individuals to concentrate and become conscious about words and *kalāms* they recite. Among Ahl-e Haqq, music is part of everything but not the main causes of good occurrences.”¹⁸

In my observations, music is an inseparable component of the Ahl-e Haqq religion. It coexists with religious practices. It has become an essential element in healing rituals because of its deep roots in Ahl-e Haqq heritage, their ideology, and beliefs in unseen worlds. The sacred music repertoire of *tanbūr* is exclusive to Ahl-e Haqq, and its performance along with *kalāms* in *Jam* context give this religious group a communal identity. To protect this identity, the Ahl-e Haqq greatly value collective practices, and among all of them, *Jam* is the most important one. The following legend illustrates the great importance that the Ahl-e Haqq attach to the *Jam*: Two of Sultān Sahāk’s companions, Mīr Sur and Dawed were wrestling. Mīr asked Sultān for more power whereas Dāwed sought help from *Jam* and was able to defeat Mīr because the collective power of *Jam* is equal or even greater than the Divine’s power (During 1998:43).

The *Jam* ritual receives its power from participants’ sense of equality and togetherness. Their gathering in this ritual becomes a sacred bond which expands into all aspects of their lives. Therefore, as Armān noted:

Ahl-e Haqq reach a level that ‘*yekishān chehel bī, chelshān bī yak*’ which means “one be forty and forty be one.” If you stick one of them with a needle, all forty feel the pain, and if one feels good, all feel good. It means one becomes all, and all become you. One’s pain becomes everyone’s pain, and communal well-being and happiness become one’s well-being.

In such a circle where participants mentally and spiritually connect with each other, a flow of positive energy will emanate and be transmitted to a sick person. There were many accounts revealed to me about bringing sick and even dead persons to the circle for the purpose of healing, and because the whole congregation concentrated on healing them with the help of music, the patients received blessed energy from the *Jam* and were healed. There are also cases where patients are not present in the circle, but they still received blessings and got healed.¹⁹

Music is often understood to have direct positive effects on humans, both psychologically and physiologically (Newel 2007:49). There are also many cultures that believe music communicates with spiritual realms. (During 2008:376) One of the functions of musical sound among the Ahl-e Haqq is the communicative connections between spiritual powers and the physical world for therapeutic purposes. Through communicating with the unseen world by means of music and offering communal meals, Ahl-e Haqq participants sincerely ask for blessings, by inviting spiritual forces down to their sacred space in hopes of experiencing healing. Although these forces can affect physical ailments (healing cancer, eliminating tumor), spiritual healing as an ultimate elimination of illness and achievement of psychological well-being is the most important aspect of healing.

To bring the participants to a hypnotic state and expose them to the therapeutic powers of music, Kalām-Khwān plays different pieces of tanbūr sacred repertoires until

the desired effect becomes evident and participants start showing symptoms of *vajd* (ecstasy). I should note that there are no records of possession of spiritual forces among the Ahl-e Haqq, and they assert that the feeling of ecstasy is attained from the enthusiasm, ebullition, and great love they feel towards the Divine. Spiritual energies they receive through their infinite love for the Divine cleanse, purify, and heal.

One of the characteristics of vernacular health belief systems, as O'Connor notes, is their empirical or observational basis for supporting practices and claims (O'Connor 1995:28). In vernacular health belief system, the workings of therapeutic actions are more important than why and how it works. During interviews, I kept asking the Ahl-e Haq people about their personal experiences and how and why they got healed. Divine intervention was the ultimate answer. They were recounting cases where God noticed their prayers and sent his blessing for healing. How these actions took place and why the Divine sent his blessings for these individuals were irrelevant to them and remained unknown to me. Armān explained that each experience is different and completely personal. Every individual has his/her particular symptoms, and God heals everyone in a different way. There are no two similar healing processes. Besides, these processes are untellable and indescribable.

When I asked Armān, "Why should the Ahl-e Haqq who have dedicated their lives to the love of God suffer from illnesses in the first place?" He replied: "Illnesses, in people's belief, are caused by bad behaviors and sins of former duns²⁰. You suffer because your previous dun committed sins. That is why we should be careful about our actions." David Hufford notes that, unlike conventional medicine, a vernacular health belief system can directly address the meaning of suffering and answer questions like

“why me?” (Hufford 1988:226). The Ahl-e Haqq health belief system offers answers to questions about illnesses and suffering. Suffering for the Ahl-e Haqq is directly related to human behaviors and the sins they or their former duns have committed. God never allows the suffering of innocents. There is also strong belief that distance from God in itself is the biggest suffering and illness one can have, and the only remedy for this illness is to unite with God. Therefore they view suffering and illnesses as a path to reach the realm of divinity. Based on this belief, getting healed does not always guaranty longevity and good health. Armān narrated about Seyyed Khalīl Ālīnezhād’s mother and how she was suffering from an ailment:

We received a message late one night that Seyyed Khalīl’s mother, who was very old, is not feeling well. We called some friends and prepared for a *Jam*. We sat in *Jam*, and Seyyed Khalīl brought his special sacred tanbūr and started playing it while his mother was sleeping in bed. He then blessed a Niyāz and recited kalām and at the end, he asked God not to let her suffer and heal her soon. We took the Niyāz, which was crystallized sugar and dissolved it in water. We gave her three to four drops from Niyāz, and she died in the early morning.²¹

Accordingly, for the Ahl-e Haqq, healing does not always mean getting cured and living longer, it is about leaving the healing in the hands of God, and accepting his will and your fate. Music and the sacred instrument, in this case, work as a conduit for the presence of the Divine and helps the patient in receiving blessings and uniting with Beloved God.

Conclusion

*Love makes bitter sweet,
love turns copper to gold,
Love makes dregs into wine,
love turns pain into healing.~ Rumi*

A couple of days before leaving Sahneh, and after reviewing the information I had collected during my stay, I decided to visit Seyyed Saeed Zolnuri's workshop to take more pictures and ask him some questions about the sound quality of tanbūr. It took a while to locate Armān and ask him to organize a meeting with Seyyed Zolnuri for an interview. I felt that Armān did not seem as jubilant as usual and could see the anxiety in his eyes. Nevertheless, I did not mention anything about it to him and waited until he started talking: "Unfortunately we cannot see Seyyed Zolnuri today. My uncle has fallen from a mulberry tree while trying to trim its branches and his situation is critical. Because of his condition, the doctors have asked us to transfer him from Sahneh to Tehran. In few hours they will send him to Tehran, and we should go with him." I said: "I am sorry for your uncle, and I can totally understand your commitment. You should go and do whatever is necessary. I will go to his workshop alone." "Unfortunately, it is not possible," Armān replied. When he saw my surprise, he continued: "Seyyed Zolnuri and other Ahl-e Haqq families that know and are related to my uncle's family, are going to Tehran to be with him and pray for his healing."

Since all the people I had planned to visit and interview were heading towards Tehran, I decided to shorten my stay, pack up, and head back to the capital as well. Two days later, I called Armān to follow up about his uncle's health and the

healing process. He said that one of the best doctors in Tehran carried out the surgery while they organized a *Jam* and prayed for him. The surgery was successful, but he needed to spend several days in the hospital to recover. As I understood from his talk, prayers would continue during these days as well.

This incident helped me understand Ahl-e Haqq's health system more clearly. Their health care strategies involve both conventional medicine and vernacular healing. Even as they trusted scientific medicine for a physical cure and gave the doctor their permission for conducting the surgery, they joined and contributed to the healing process through their beliefs. According to his family, Armān's uncle was healed using both scientific and vernacular health systems, even though the injury was critical and the doctors had reservations about the surgery's success. While doctors and the medical team were concerned about theoretical and practical aspects of the scientific health system in an attempt to cure the patient, Armān's family and relatives were more likely attentive on the therapeutic efficacy and not the actual medical process. To increase the therapeutic efficacy, they started to link the situation with the spiritual world and ask for divine intervention in the healing process. By praying and asking for the presence of the Divine, they place the fate of the patient in his hands and wholeheartedly accept the outcome whichever way it goes.

Music and Healing

Sacred music has found its way into the Ahl-e Haqq's religious ceremonies, mourning, and prayers. A vital function of music in all of these contexts is spiritually

connecting an individual to the realm of the Divine. It functions as an element that strengthens the sense of loving God which is increasingly becoming a dominant discourse in Sufism. The Ahl-e Haqq share similarities with Sufi groups in believing that the purest way to reach the Divine is through the path of love. Love of the Divine “Grows up from the basic declaration of faith, the assertion of God’s unique reality—“No god but God” (Chittick 2007:84). By having faith in God and placing absolute “trust” (*tawakkul*) in him, they put their life in God’s hand and rely on him in all aspects of their lives (Rahman 1998:27). To have complete trust in God means total reliance on the Divine’s intervention in healing, even though they might seek medical treatment. They do not hesitate to pursue conventional medical treatment for illnesses, but they believe that they should get spiritually healed for God to cause them to get well (Rahman 1998:29). Strengthening the sense of love and having faith in God facilitates the flow of *barekat*, a spiritual energy emanating from God.

Clifford Geertz comments on the concept of barekat:

Literarily, baraka¹ means blessing, in the sense of divine favor. But in spreading out from that nuclear meaning, specifying and delimiting it, it encloses a whole range of linked ideas: material prosperity, physical well-being, bodily satisfaction, completion, luck, plenitude, and, the aspect most stressed by Western writers anxious to force it into a pigeonhole with mana, magical power....it is a conception of the mode in which the divine reaches into the world. (Geertz 1971:44)

Barekat, as Geertz describes it, is a blessing from the Divine which can help individuals to be healed. Therefore, music functions as a component in receiving the healing barekat from the Divine.

Ahl-e Haqq's Religious Belief in Heart and Healing

The Ahl-e Haqq deeply believe in *ālam-e rowhānī* or spiritual world.

Believing in this mystical realm is central to healing and well-being. It is the spiritual world that is the source of the healing energy of barekat. According to Suhrawardi's² theosophy, the "physical world is very much related to the spiritual world," and "in order for Sufis to perfect their spirituality to meet the Divine, their customs must reflect their internal condition" (Ul Huda 2004:828). Accordingly, the barekat and consequently the healing energy that flows from spiritual world can be increased through the physical action of playing music and reciting kalām, which in turn increases an individual's healing energy.

To be able to receive barekat through music and kalām, a person's heart should be cleansed from the rust of the mundane world. William Chittick describes the role of the heart in Islam and Sufism as: "The "heart" in Koranic terms is the center of life, consciousness, intelligence, and intentionality. The heart is aware and conscious before mind articulates thought, just as it is alive before the body acts. Faith's inmost core is found only in the heart" (Chittick 2000:8). For the Ahl-e Haqq, then, the heart is where the faith in the Divine has been placed. Moreover, the heart is in fact "a sensory" organ (Kapchan 2013: 139). It is the place that individuals can feel the power and energy of the music. Al-Ghazzali, an eleventh-century Sufi philosopher, elaborated on this subject: "Even thus is the tasting of music and singing in the heart. After the sound has reached the ear it is perceived by an inward sense in the heart, and he who lacks that inevitably lacks the pleasure that goes with it"(Ghazzālī 2009:32). Ghazzālī is emphasizing that "music is not just heard with the

ears but with the heart, it is tasted, known, incorporated”(Kapchan 2013:139).

Therefore, it is necessary to taste music with your heart which means “mystical intuition” and not only listen to it (139). When music helps individuals to achieve mystical intuition, love possesses the heart, and the body is then prepared to receive the spiritual energy and the fortune of healing.

Healing Process in Ahl-e Haqq’s Belief

Healing among the Ahl-e Haqq can be said to rest upon three pillars: sound and musical interpretations, sacred text, and spiritual experience of performance. The sacred instrument of the Ahl-e Haqq, tanbūr, is created from holy materials through a sacred process, where it becomes a conduit for communication with divinity. The music produced by this sacred instrument becomes a vehicle for the transmission of spiritual power. Sacred poems or kalāms are words praising the spiritual powers, and by reciting them, individuals forget their physical existence and uncover the spiritual realm. When both these essential elements combine in the context of spiritual performance, they work as a catalyst for the spiritual development of participants. Mehrāb Esrāfīlī describes the Ahl-e Haqq music as inherently sacred with significant spiritual energy. When played in a *Jam* ritual, it invites supernatural and other spiritual entities to join the circle and participate in the ritual by spreading around positive energy, mercy, and blessings. This positive energy and blessing can benefit both the individuals present at the ritual by strengthening their faiths and religious enthusiasm and other public members who are not present by for example

healing them of their illnesses. There is a great belief that Divinity will resolve all participants' problems in *Jam*.

There are many accounts of personal healings¹ with the help of the Ahl-e Haqq music, such as healing a person suffering from fever by playing tanbūr throughout the night (as in the example in chapter 4). Music therapy among the Ahl-e Haqq is not merely about the effects produced by sounds, but rather about the whole ritual and how collective energy can have healing powers. For Ahl-e Haqq, the healing process and its outcome are but a segment of a far grander and far-reaching essence and universality of *Jam* ritual. For the Ahl-e Haqq, participation in this religious ritual is a communal, religious, and social activity and there is no room for individual needs. As participants assert, however, the collective positive energy that is conjured up from the atmosphere, the music, and the recitation of sacred poems will heal physical ailments as well.

During *Jam* ritual, the participants' undivided attention is directed towards the Divine, and their hearts become void of all material matters and ready to be filled with love. The participants aspire to detach themselves from mundane life and immerse into the spiritual and barekat realm. When individuals achieve total detachment and are fully engulfed in the realm of the spirituality of *Jam*, the energy of barekat and love will stream through their body, and when the ritual ends, the comfort and the sense of well-being will remain in their physical bodies. In listening to Ahl-e Haqq music accompanied by their sacred kalām alongside the *Jam* context, I could clearly sense at least four different areas of my body being involved; my ears, my nerve system, my thought, and my heart. Whenever the music tempo ascended, I could feel the music flow through my ears and find its way into my thoughts. There were very short moments during which I

was totally immersed in the music and the kalām, where the music pierced through and overtook control of my body. Moreover, finally, I could feel the music in my heart. This repeating process which continued throughout the whole performance emptied my heart of all kinds of bad thoughts and negative feelings, and I started feeling the ineffable sense of love. When I later shared my experience with Armān, he asserted that I had experienced but a minute trace of the Divine’s love. Even this minimal amount of Divine’s love was enough to wipe out my stress and feel the empowering sense of well-being. Then he further emphasized that if anyone could absorb higher doses of spiritual energy, he would have a greater sense of being well. Therefore it is important to note that, while the spirituality and believing in barekat and divine love are great elements for receiving blessing and being healed, the physical engagement in *Jam* ritual is equally significant for receiving the blessing. To be able to receive effective energy for healing, an individual should prepare his/her mind and body for receiving spiritual energy.

“Deep listening,” therefore, becomes of great importance. This term was first coined by Pauline Oliveros, where she offers the following definition:

Deep Listening involves going below the surface of what is heard and also expanding to the whole field of sound whatever one’s usual focus might be. Such forms of listening are essential to the process of unlocking layer after layer of imagination, meaning, and memory down to the cellular level of human experience (Becker, Judith 2004:2).

For Oliveros, the sound is not just a passive perception, it engages the imagination and creates meaning. This active and self-conscious listening of the Ahl-e Haqq during the ritual unlocks its meaning and is the major concept of linking the physical world to the spiritual world by “evocation of emotions specifically associated with sacredness” (Kapchan 2013:139). Accordingly, *Jam* participants elevate and purify their soul by

listening to the sacred music and reciting the sacred kalām. Purification of the soul from imperfections will transform the way participants perceive the world. They will feel the presence of the Divine in the circle and in anything they see. The sense of the presence of the Divine, which Armān describes as a form of light, will purify not only all souls in the circle but also all those affiliated to this ritual whether near or far and fill them with pure love which is the main source of healing. To explain it in a poetic way, Mehrāb quoted one of Rumi's poems:

Dead I was, Alive I became
Weeping I was, Laughter I became
The fortune of love came and
I became eternal fortune

In my investigation, I also came to understand how these believers activate a perception of collective energy they receive from the spiritual realm in the context of the *Jam* ritual. The activation of such energy empowers individuals to communicate with spiritual forces and restore the sense of physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Use of music within a ritual context helps the communication process between the participants and most powerful healer, the Divine. The Ahl-e Haqq define healing as: “to have good feeling.” Therefore, the main objective of healing is not curing a disease, but rather is about having good feeling to be beneficiaries of divine blessing and “surrender to God's will.”²

Among this religious group, healing finds its meaning in communal practices.

Armān emphasized that:

If we want to help someone to get healed, all should feel the patient's pain and focus on the ailment and its cure. We should all concentrate on our positive energies, and spiritual forces will guide these energies to a patient. For that, we

should all be whole-hearted, and this is only possible through purity of soul and unexceptional love.³

The goal of communal practices, which are pillars of their religion, is to achieve good feeling ultimately. For the Ahl-e Haqq, healing does not always mean that individuals would be physically cured and live a long life. It is about the belief that sufferings and ailments occur for a reason such as the Divine's test of a person's faith or having committed a sin and lived in vain in a previous *dun*. The Ahl-e Haqq deeply believe that there are reasons behind human sufferings that are beyond our imagination and understanding. Hence, they do not enthusiastically look for reasons for their ailments and suffering, and rather think of it as their fate and rely on God's will with respect to its alleviation. By accepting God's will and placing absolute trust in him, the Ahl-e Haqq have faith that the Divine knows what is best for them, and therefore, they do not question their fate. This is the main reason why they do not directly ask the Divine for a cure from physical diseases. Through recitation of kalām and connecting themselves to the spiritual realm, individuals try to bring harmony and love to their body and be healed from daily stress and depression induced from thinking about the disease and leave the cure in the hands of the Divine.

The practices and participation in *Jam* ritual help prevent and eliminate harmful, negative forces and energies, and chaos, and replace them with love and harmony. It is through this concept of good feeling that they find healings in rituals, experience divine love, and repulse the main sources they identify as bringing about disease and ailments: negative and evil thoughts.

NOTES

Introduction

1. *Daf* is a large frame drum made of wood and animal skin with metal rings or chain incorporated into its frame. *Daf* has extensive uses in mystical Sufi and Dervish traditions and rites.
2. Shiraz is the capital of Fars province in southwestern Iran.
3. Tehran is the capital of Iran and Tehran province in the north of the country.
4. *Pīr* is a title for the spiritual guide who helps and instructs his disciples on the Sufi path. The path starts when a person takes an oath of allegiance to a *Pīr* and repents from his/her previous sins. After that oath, the student is called *Morīd* and *Pīr* is his *Morād*.
5. The Lur are a nomadic ethnic group living mainly in western and southwestern Iran.
6. Azerī or Azerbaijanis are one of the largest ethnic groups in Iran. They mainly live in the northwest regions of the country.
7. Fārs are the predominant ethnic group of Iran.
8. *Sharīʿat* is a fundamental Islamic law which is derived from Quran and the Hadith (prophet Mohammad's saying or a report describing his actions, words or habits).
9. Alī ibn abī Taleb was the Prophet Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law. He ruled as Muslims' caliphate from 656 to 661. For Shias, he is the most important Islamic figure after Mohammad who had been chosen by God as his successor and first Imam.
10. *Kalam-e Saranjām* is the most significant collection of Ahle-e Haqq's sacred texts which is believed to belong to the period of Sultān Sahāk.
11. *Haftan*, literally meaning "the seven," are the seven spirits of the Ahl-e Haqq religion that together represent the idea of God.

12. *Seyyed* in Ahl-e Haqq and Islam are not related. In Islam, “seyyed” refers to descendants of prophet Mohammad through his daughter Fatima and her husband Alī. This is not the case among the Ahl-e Haqq people.
13. *Sādāt* is the plural form of *Seyyed*.
14. The interviews’ audio and video files are in my possession and to cite them, I have used my coding system for numbering files.
15. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.02.15.1-1.
16. All interviews that I have conducted during my fieldwork in Sahneh were in Persian. Therefore all quotes that I use in my thesis are translated from Persian to English. I have tried as much as possible to stay faithful to transcriptions, which sometimes resulted in sentences that do not match Standard English structures. There were also Kurdish words in transcriptions which I consulted Armān for their accuracy in both transcription and translation.
17. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.02.15.1-2.
18. Interview, AHLHAQ.Taheri.07.09.15.7.
19. Nūr Alī Elāhī was a high-ranking musician and spiritual leader of the Ahl-e Haqq. Nowadays, some Ahl-e Haqq families have come to believe that he has not presented an honest and true image of their religion and music.
20. Although Nūr Alī Elāhī is a famous figure among the Ahl-e Haqq and has his own followers, however, based on my observations and as many of my interviewees noted, the majority of Ahl-e Haqq people who live in Kermanshah accuse him of revealing the secret of their religion to outsiders and falsifying important principles of their religion such as shaving of the mustache.

21. The eleven holy khāndāns (families) are: Khāmūshi, Shāh Ebrahīmī, Ālī Qalandar, Yādegāri, Mīrsūrī, Mostafayī, Bābū Isā, Zolnurī, Ātash Beigī, Shah Hayāsī, Bābā Heidarī.

22. Although participating in rituals and religious practices is not permitted for outsiders, the final decision however is in the hands of the Pīr. As a spiritual leader of a khāndān, he can conditionally permit an outsider's participation. After meeting and discussing my intention of this research, a Pīr from the Khaksār Dervish group gave his blessing and granted me permission to participate and observe their ritual.

Chapter Two

1. AHLHAQ.Mehrab.07.09.15.10.

2. The word "Ustād" means master in Persian language. It is often used to denote a person's expertise in the field of arts and higher educations.

3. *Gelim* is a flat tapestry-woven carpet.

4. Tor or El-Tor is the name of the mountain where Moses is believed to have received his commandments from God.

5. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.02.1-2.

6. I collected the same narrative during my interviews with Armān Dakeī and Mehrāb Suresrāfīlī. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.02.2-1 and Interview, AHLHAQ.Mehrab.07.09.15.10.

7. Interview, AHLHAQ.Zulnouri.07.08.15.5.

8. Interview, AHLHAQ.Zulnouri.07.08.15.5.

9. Interview, AHLHAQ.Zulnouri.07.08.15.5.

10. Interview, AHLHAQ.Zulnouri.07.08.15.5.
11. Interview, AHLHAQ.Zulnouri.07.08.15.6.
12. Interview, AHLHAQ.Zulnouri.07.08.15.6.
13. Interview, AHLHAQ.Zulnouri.07.08.15.6. Although there are other etymologies for tanbūr, however, the people that I interviewed in Sahneh used this etymology when I asked them about the meaning of word “tanbūr.” In his comprehensive book about tanbūr and its origin, Seyyed Khalīl Ālīnezhād mentions various etymologies for the word “tanbūr” throughout history. Even though these etymologies have not been academically approved yet, they are widely in use among the Ahl-e Haqq. Two other etymologies that Ālīnezhād presents are “the bitter gourd” due to the possibility of making tanbūr with gourds back in time and his own hypothesized etymology as “with cord.”
14. The first time I realized that the word “performance” is not the preferred word amongst the Ahl-e haqq was during my interview with Seyyed Mehrāb Esrafilī when he paused for a while after I asked him for the first time to “perform” for me and he explained that he would be thankful if I do not use this word during my interview. Interview AHLHAQ.Mehrab.07.09.15.10.
15. During *Jam*, only men play tanbūr.
16. In his interview, Mehrāb noted that: “each performance of a piece of music is different because each time is a re-creation of the same piece. But also because tanbūr-players learn how to play by observing and listening to their masters and practicing his skill of playing, hence, every performance will be different because the techniques that they have learnt are different. Nothing is written. You learn what you see, as everyone else did during the history.” Interview AHLHAQ.Mehrab. 07.09.15.10.

17. Interview, AHLHAQ.Zulnouri.07.08.15.6.

18. Music gives the Ahl-e haqq a unique way of representing their beliefs within the Muslim society. Using music in almost all religious practices and its important role in their community and ordinary daily life gives them a distinctive identity by which many people in Iran know them through their sacred instrument and music.

19. Yār which means “[divine] friend” or “beloved” refers to the Divine.

Chapter Three

1. Interview AHLHAQ.Arman.07.02.15.1-1.

2. Hawrāmī is one of the main dialects of Gurāni language. Gurāni is sometimes referred to as the “sacred language” of Ahl-e Haqq people because the best known collections of kalām are written in this language.

3. Ā Seyyed Berāka (surnamed as Seyyed Berāka) is a well-known religious figure of the Ahl-e Haqq. He was born in 1795 and martyred in 1873. He had forty dervish apostles that later became famous as *Chil-Tanān*.

4. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.03.15.2-1.

5. Interview, AHLHAQ.Mehrab.07.09.15.10.

6. For more information about Ishans and their healing process, see Manijeh Maghsudi, “Healing Rituals Among Female Turkmans of Iran,” in *Women’s Rituals and Ceremonies in Shiite Iran and Muslim Communities; Methodological and Theoretical Challenges*, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (Berlin: LIT Verlag Münster, 2014) 63-78. Also for more information about using sacred and divine words for healing in Iran, see Parviz Feyzi, and Bahman Rahimi, “Anthropological Study of Ritual Healing with an Emphasis on the

Role of ‘Healing by Prayer’ in Kermanshah Province,” *Medical History* 6 (2012): 97-112.

7. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.02.15.1-1.

8. Ibn ‘Atā Allah was born in Cairo in 1259. He was a spiritual master of Shadhili Sufi order.

9. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.03.15.2-3.

10. There is a great tendency among the Ahl-e Haqq in believing that their kalāms have stayed intact and untouched. The belief mostly arises from the idea of the sacredness of these kalāms and the belief that true believers would go to extreme lengths to protect and keep them untouched. However, during the interview (AHLHAQ.Arman.07.03.15.2-3) Armān mentioned that despite Ahl-e Haqq people’s belief, mistakes could be traced in both words and rhythms which scribes unintentionally made during writing. These mistakes have led to formation of different versions of the kalāms. Nonetheless, as people mostly recite kalāms orally without referring to written sources, they are not aware of existing differences and variations.

11. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.03.15.2-3.

12. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.03.15.2-2.

13. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.03.15.2-8.

14. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.03.15.2-9.

15. Murīd means “committed one” and refers to a person who is committed to a spiritual guide (murād) in spiritual path.

16. Karāmāt is an ability to perform supernatural wonders by Muslim saints. This thaumaturgic gift, well known in Islamic mysticism, is similar to miracle.

17. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.02.15.2-1.
18. Interview.AHLHAQ.Mehrab.07.09.15.10.

Chapter Four

1. Interview, AHLHAQ.Zulnouri.07.08.15.5.
2. Aqā means “Sir”.
3. Because of his great influence on Ahl-e Haqq as a spiritual leader, Seyyed Khalīl Ālīnezhād was exiled several times during his life. He was murdered and then burnt in fire in Sweden in 1980s.
4. Interview, AHLHAQ. Mehrab.07.09.15.10.
5. Interview, AHLHAQ.Zulnouri.07.08.15.5.
6. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.09.15.8.
7. It is customary in some areas in Iran to cover valuable and expensive hand woven Persian carpets with tapestries to protect them from wear and tear. These coverings are removed during special occasions and ceremonies.
8. Sultān-e Haqiqat refers to the Divine.
9. Food prepared for Nazr is called Nazrī.
10. More extensive food description will be discussed in the following section.
11. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.07.15.3-1. Armān’s usage of present tense to describe the *Jam* ritual during this interview was an intentional act to indicate that he was talking about ritual in general and not the particular one.
12. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.07.15.3-1.
13. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.0715.3-3.

14. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.0715.3-3.

15. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.03.15.2-2.

16. These two portions are later handed to kalām-khwān who plays tanbūr during the ritual.

17. Qawwali is a Sufi Muslim devotional music with rhythmic repetition of poetries popular in South Asia. For more information see Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context, and Meaning in Qawwali* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

18. Interview, AHLHAQ.Mehrab.07.09.15.11.

19. The several instances of healing without the presence of patient in the circle were informally shared with me but individuals who shared their personal experiences did not want their stories to be published.

20. For *dun* meaning, see introduction chapter p.8.

21. Interview, AHLHAQ.Mehrab.07.09.15.11.

Conclusion

1. Baraka is the Arabic form of “barekat.”

2. Shahāb al-Din Yahyāibn Habash Suhrawadi was a well-known Persian philosopher and founder of an important illuminationism school.

3. Interview, AHLHAQ.Mehrab.07.09.15.10.

4. Interview, AHLHAQ.Arman.07.03.15.2-3.

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Glossary

A

Ahl-e Haqq: Literally means “people of truth”. Also referred to as Yārsan. Ahl-e Haqq is a vernacular religious group and the majority of its followers live in Kermanshah, Iran.

Āzari: Azarī or Azerbaijanis are one of the largest ethnic groups in Iran. They mainly live in the northwest regions of the country.

Aqā: means “Sir”

Avesta: The sacred book of Zoroastrians

Alī ibn Abī Tāleb: Alī Ibn Abī Taleb was the Prophet Mohammad’s cousin and son-in-law. He ruled as Muslim’s caliphate from 656 to 661. For Shias, he is the most important Islamic figure after Mohammad who had been chosen by God as his successor and first Imam.

B

Benyāmīn: One of the Hafttan and the incarnation of Archangel Gabriel.

bash: a portion of the blessed food that contains spiritual power

C

Chiltanān: Literally “the forty” refers to the Forty spirits that form the idea of the Divine.

D

daf: Daf is large frame drum made of wood and animal skin with metal rings or chain incorporated into its frame.

Dāwed: Also pronounce Dawūd, is one of the Hafttan.

dun-ā-dun: a period of approximately 50,000-year cycles where a soul has to go through purification journeys to reach its final evolutionary status

dun: A reincarnation is likened to that of being dressed.

F

Fārs: Fārs are the predominant ethnic group of Iran

H

Haftan: literary meaning “the seven”, are the seven spirits of the Ahl-e Haqq religion that together represent the idea of God.

Hawrāmī: One of the dialects of Kurdish language.

I

imān: Faith

J

Jam: the ritual of blessing food among Ahl-e Haqq

Jamkhāne: The space where *Jam* takes place.

K

Kalam-e Saranjām: Kalam-e Saranjām is the most significant collection of Ahle-e Haqq's sacred texts which is believed to belong to the period of Sultān Sahāk.

Kalām-khwān: An individual who chant the sacred kalām. Most of the time he play tanbūr as well to accompany himself.

Khāndān: The eleven holy khāndāns (families) are: Khāmūshi, Shāh Ebrahīmī, Ālī Qalandar, Yādegāri, Mīrsūrī, Mostafayī, Bābū Isā, Zolnurī, Ātash Beigī, Shah Hayāsī, Bābā Heidārī.

Khādem: Literally means "servant" and refers to servant of the *Jam* that helps in serving blessed food during the ritual.

L

Lur: The Lur are nomadic ethnic group living mainly in western and southwestern Iran.

M

Moteshar'ehīn: individuals who abide by the sharī'at.

N

Nazr: A ritual of food blessing. Nazr or offering can be classified into two broad categories: *Niyāz* and *qorbānī*. *Niyāz* does not include animal sacrifice. It can consist of anything edible, from fruits, to crystalized sugar, to nuts. The only exception is cooked food. *Qorbānī*, on the other hand, can either be bloodless or of blood sacrifices.

nīstī: non-existence

Niyāz: *Niyāz* is an Ahl-e Haqq food blessing ritual that does not include animal sacrifice. It can consist of anything edible, from fruits, to crystalized sugar, to nuts.

P

pākī: Purity

Pīr: *Pīr* is a title for the spiritual guide who helps and instructs his disciples on the Sufi path.

Pīr Musī: One of the Haftan and manifestation of recording Angel.

R

radā: Chivalry

Ramzbār: the mother of Sultan Sahāk and one of the Haftan.
rāstī: Truthfulness

S

Sādāt: Sādāt is the plural form of Seyyed.

samā: The literal meaning of samā is “listening”.

seyyed: “Sir”, “master”, and “leader”. It refers to a person with apparent blood link to Sultān.

Shāh Khwāshin: The first earthly manifestation of the Divine.

shari’at: Shari’at is a fundamental Islamic law which is derived from Quran and the Hadith.

Sultān Sahāk: an individual highly revered by the Ahl-e Haqq people who is the head or “king” of the Haftan.

suznāk: a religious sound that penetrates the soul and burns the heart.

T

tanbūr: The sacred instrument of the Ahl-e Haqq.

tasawwuf: Sufism

tarkeyī: tanbūr that is crafted using a single solid piece of wood, and the other is made with strips of wood aligned beside each other in a pattern.

Y

Yār: the “Divine friend” or “beloved” that refers to the Divine.

Yārsān: the Friend of Sultān (the [Divine] King).