

# The Beyragh-zanun Ritual as Participatory Performance art: An Analysis of Performative Elements in Shushtar

Zahra Hosseinzadeh<sup>1</sup>, Mohsen Zahabi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Department of Screenwriting, Soroush University of Applied Science - Unit 17, Iran)

<sup>2</sup>(Department of Acting and Directing, Faculty of Art and Architecture, Tarbiat Modares University, Iran.)

**ABSTRACT :** *The Beyragh-zanun ritual is among the oldest traditional and religious practices in northern Khuzestan Province, especially in Shushtar and Dezful. It is performed annually on the night of Eid al-Adha, commemorating devotion and sacrifice. While pilgrims conduct sacrificial rites in Mecca, parallel ceremonies are held at the home of the pilgrim (Haji), organized by family members. This ritual also incorporates expressive elements such as singing and rhythmic movement. Using a descriptive-analytical approach and relying on library sources, this study examines and categorizes the dramatic and performative aspects of the Beyragh-zanun ritual in Shushtar. It addresses two main questions: what performance qualities characterize the ritual, and what dramatic elements it contains. The findings show that Beyragh-zanun can be understood as a quasi-theatrical religious ceremony formed through the interaction of indigenous and religious elements, and can be interpreted as a participatory form of performance art.*

**KEYWORDS -** *Beyragh-zanun, Performance Arts, Performing Arts, Ritual, Shushtar*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Rituals exemplify a society's culture, traditions, and customs, arising from the deep-seated concepts and worldviews that shape its collective identity. Owing to the enduring connection between a community and its rituals, these practices embody the society's symbols, beliefs, values, and artistic expressions in tangible forms. Accordingly, the scholarly study of rituals is of great importance, as it reveals new insights into a society's historical formation and cultural creativity. The *Beyragh-zanun* ritual exemplifies this principle, having originated within the ancient culture of the Shushtar<sup>1</sup> people in Iran. This ritual has various significant performative aspects that depict the deep connection between the essence of this Shushtari ritual and the performing arts.

Evidently, the relationship between the performing arts and ritual has long been the subject of extensive scholarly research and theoretical inquiries, with the aim of deepening our understanding of their ancient and enduring interconnection. It is noteworthy that, in line with these studies, several scholars in the fields of performing arts and theatre, drawing on their research findings, have identified distinct dramatic elements within ritual practices and have regarded the history of ritual as an integral part of the long-standing history of the performing arts. They maintain that ritual has played a fundamental and formative role in shaping diverse forms of performance throughout history and continues to embody a profound and enduring connection with theatre and the performing arts.

---

<sup>1</sup> Shushtar city is an ancient city situated in Khuzestan province in Iran.

Despite the abundance of studies on the relationship between ritual and performance, limited scholarly attention has been given to the indigenous rituals of Shushtar, particularly the Beyragh-zanun ritual. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the performative elements of one of the oldest spectacular rituals of the ancient city of Shushtar, known as the Beyragh-zanun ritual. By analysing and categorising its performative elements, the study seeks to address the following fundamental research questions: What performative elements can be identified within the Beyragh-zanun ritual, and considering its performance characteristics in Shushtar, what type of performing art can this ritual be categorised as? This study draws on multiple sources and methodological approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Beyragh-zanun ritual. It relies on the authors' personal experiences and library sources to examine this ritual.

## II. THE PERFORMANCE PROCESS OF THE BEYRAGH-ZANUN RITUAL

The Beyragh-zanun ritual is still performed each year on the eve of *Eid al-Adha*<sup>2</sup> in Shushtar at the home of the pilgrim (*Haji*)<sup>3</sup> by members of his family. Eid al-Adha, or the "Festival of Sacrifice," is one of the two most important holidays in the Islamic calendar. It commemorates the Prophet Abraham's (Ibrahim) absolute faith and willingness to sacrifice his own son in obedience to God's command, before God provided a ram in the boy's place (Algul 2005: 71).

Traditionally, before departing for the pilgrimage, the Haji presents his children with a green fabric (*Khal'ati*)<sup>4</sup> as a symbolic gift or provides them with money to acquire one. Prior to the beginning of the ceremony, the Haji's family prepares the flags and other ritual implements and invites relatives, friends, and neighbours to attend the celebration, where sweets and dinner are served.

The most significant part of the ceremony, as its name suggests, is the raising of green and white flags, known in the Shushtari and Dezfuli<sup>5</sup> dialects as *Beyragh*. In the past, when apartment living was uncommon and rooftops were visible from the alleyways, the children of pilgrims raised these flags once the guests had arrived for the celebration. A green sequined flag is hoisted in honour of Imam Zaman, the Twelfth Imam in Shi'a belief. Another green sequined flag represents the male head of the household, while a smaller white sequined flag symbolizes the Haji's wife (if she has also undertaken the pilgrimage). If the Haji's children have also completed the pilgrimage, additional smaller flags are placed beside the others to represent each of them (Mohseni 2017: 3).

Historically, the ceremony took place in two areas of the Haji's house, one for women and the other for men. When the house was not large enough to accommodate both sections, the ritual was sometimes held across the Haji's home and a neighbouring house, with one house hosting the men's section and the other hosting the women's section. During the raising of the flags, a local singer (known as the *Chavoushi-khan*) performs traditional songs called *Chavoushi*<sup>6</sup>, specifically associated with the ritual. Meanwhile, guests gathered in the courtyard participate in the celebration through clapping, dancing, and ululating<sup>7</sup> (locally referred to as *Kel zadan*).

Another important custom in this ritual is that the daughters and female relatives of the Haji wear green clothes and perform a traditional Shushtari and Dezfuli dance known as *Gombah* (Mohseni 2017: 3–4). The Shushtari refer to this performance as *Gombah kandan*. The dance is fast-paced, with women performing very

<sup>2</sup> Eid Al-Adha or "The feast of Sacrifice" is a major Islamic rituals commemorating the Prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son in obedience to god. It coincides with the culmination of the annual Hajj ceremony and is observed through communal prayers, the ritual slaughter of livestock, and the distribution of meat to the poor.

<sup>3</sup> Haji is an honourific title bestowed upon a Muslim who has successfully completed the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

<sup>4</sup> Khal'ati is a length of fabric traditionally offered as a gift to honour or show appreciation to someone.

<sup>5</sup> Dezful city is an ancient city situated in Khuzestan province in Iran.

<sup>6</sup> Chavoush-khani (also spelled Chavoushi) is a traditional Iranian ritual of singing or chanting, historically performed by a herald or ceremonial guide known as a Chavoush or Chavoush-khan. These criers historically led religious processions, such as those to Mecca or the shrine of Imam Reza, and guided caravans through dangerous terrain. The term comes from the Persian word chavosh, which means "herald," "crier," or "guide," and -khani, meaning "reading" or "chanting."

<sup>7</sup> Kel Zadan or Ululating is a long, wavering, high-pitched vocal sound produced by rapid tongue movement, typically used in Middle Eastern and African cultures to express joy or grief.

short jumps on one foot, stamping their feet, and moving their bodies rhythmically up and down, all while snapping their fingers. During the performance, the women also typically sing local poems and songs, often in unison and in a coordinated, melodic manner, reflecting the ritual's cultural and communal significance.

### III. THE PERFORMATIVE ASPECTS OF THE BEYRAGH-ZANUN RITUAL

Across present-day indigenous societies, numerous spectacular ritual performances can be observed. This raises the question of which performative aspects these performances, including the Beyragh-zanun ritual, inherently possess. To explore this question, it is first necessary to examine existing theories and definitions of ritual in order to identify the performative elements commonly shared among such performances. Accordingly, before offering a detailed analysis of the Beyragh-zanun ritual's performative elements, this section reviews the general and shared performative aspects of rituals, providing a foundation for identifying the specific performative aspects present in the Beyragh-zanun ritual.

Among contemporary theatre scholars and experts, there is a consensus that, although it is impossible to pinpoint an exact origin for rituals, they should be regarded as one of the oldest forms of performing arts, meaning an art form executed creatively in front of one or more spectators (Merriam-Webster n.d.: para. 1). Many theatre historians, including André Schaeffner, have even described ritual as the mother and origin of theatre.

Additionally, a notable point in the theories of these scholars is their consensus that the origin of theatre lies in religious ritual performances. For instance, according to Schaeffner, if we today accept that Greek theatre emerged from religious festivals and rites, we must also acknowledge the logical inference that these festivals and religious rituals contained performative, "quasi-performative," and "pre-performative" elements, the transformation of which ultimately led to the development of theatre as an art form. He further emphasizes that even the ancient Greeks themselves attributed the origin of theatre to the god Dionysus<sup>8</sup>, considering the creation of theatre as a direct evolution of these rituals.

Schaeffner suggested that many ancient rituals, especially those connected to vegetation or fertility deities, such as the worship of Demeter<sup>9</sup>, Hera<sup>10</sup>, and Artemis<sup>11</sup> in Greece; Ishtar<sup>12</sup> and Tammuz<sup>13</sup> in Babylon; or Cybele<sup>14</sup> and Lupercus<sup>15</sup> in Rome, incorporated numerous thematic and performative features that can be described as "pre-performative" or "quasi-performative." These features included ritual narratives involving the death and resurrection of a vegetation god, sacred marriages, staged combats, ceremonial acts of almsgiving, processions with masked participants, executions of prisoners, transformations of appearance and attire, reversals of social roles, festive revelry, carnival-like events, and similar practices. Taken together, these activities can be seen as early forms of performative expression, representing a kind of primitive theatre in both performative and symbolic terms (Schaeffner et al. 1965: 125–126).

Oscar Brockett also traces the origins of performance to the emergence of rituals and ceremonial practices. He believes that early humans gradually came to perceive certain forces as controlling vital resources, such as food, necessary for their survival. Lacking a clear understanding of natural causation, they associated these forces with supernatural or magical powers and sought methods to gain their favor. Over time, the practices devised to appeal to these forces became linked with anticipated outcomes, were repeated, refined, and ultimately

---

<sup>8</sup> Dionysus is the ancient Greek god of wine, fertility, ritual madness, and theatre, often associated with ecstatic celebration and the blurring of social boundaries.

<sup>9</sup> Demeter is the ancient Greek goddess of agriculture, harvest, and fertility, who presided over the cycle of life and death and was central to the Eleusinian mysteries.

<sup>10</sup> Hera is the ancient Greek queen of the gods and goddess of marriage and women.

<sup>11</sup> Artemis is the ancient Greek goddess of the hunt, wilderness, and childbirth.

<sup>12</sup> Ishtar is the Mesopotamian goddess of love, fertility, and war.

<sup>13</sup> Tammuz is a Mesopotamian god of vegetation and shepherds, lover of Ishtar, whose death and rebirth were ritually mourned.

<sup>14</sup> Cybele is an Anatolian mother goddess of fertility, nature, and wild animals, often worshipped in ecstatic rites.

<sup>15</sup> Lupercus is a Roman god of shepherds, often identified with Faunus, in whose honour the festival of Lupercalia was held.

formalized into rituals. At this stage, the entire group or tribe would take part in performing the ritual, with the supernatural forces themselves regarded as the principal audience (Brockett 1977: 30).

Brockett also highlighted five key features of rituals, emphasizing their various dimensions, including their performative aspects, and argued that even the most solemn or austere rituals are inherently visually compelling and performative.

“First, ritual is a form of knowledge. Myth and ritual embody a society’s understanding of the universe, for they are attempts to define the human situation and its relationship to the world. Second, ritual may be didactic. Since the distinguishing mark of a primitive society is the absence of a written language, ritual may serve as a means of passing on traditions and knowledge... Third, ritual may be extended to influence or control events. One of the fundamental premises of many rituals is that a desired effect [such as success in battle, adequate rainfall, or the favor of some supernatural power] can be achieved by acting it out... Fourth, ritual is often used to glorify a supernatural power, a victory in hunt or war, the society’s past, a hero, or a totem... Fifth, ritual may entertain and give pleasure. Even the most serious ceremony provides pleasure through spectacle, the repetition of formal patterns, or the skill of the performers” (Brockett 1977: 32–34).

Considering Brockett’s definitions of the general features of rituals, it is important to note that he explicitly emphasizes how rituals, when performed by a skilled group of practitioners, inherently possess a performative and entertaining dimension for their audience. Rituals that incorporate performative elements, such as proficient performers, are thus regarded as visually compelling ceremonial performances. Brockett further argues that performing arts, theatre, and ritual share a close relationship and exhibit common performative elements, including music, dance, vocal expressions including speech and chanting, masks, costumes, performers, spectators, and staging (Brockett 1977: 34).

Consequently, it can be asserted that, beyond being recognised simply as a ritual, the Beyragh-zanun ceremony can be considered a form of ceremonial performance with “quasi-performative” and “pre-performative” aspects. Furthermore, this ancient ritual of the people of Shushtar can also be regarded as a performing art, incorporating various performative elements such as groups of performers, dance, and vocal expressions including speech and chanting, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

#### **IV. PERFORMATIVE ELEMENTS OF THE BEYRAGH-ZANUN RITUAL**

##### **4.1 Symbols and Symbolic Elements**

Symbols are widely recognized as one of the most essential components of the performing arts, as they embody and convey the prevailing cultural values and beliefs of a society in symbolic form. They function as key manifestations of a community’s collective identity, serving as cultural identifiers that reflect and define its unique worldview and values (Rozik 2002: 9). An examination of these symbols enhances our understanding of the fundamental characteristics and underlying philosophies that influence the development of indigenous performing arts within a community.

In the Beyragh-zanun ritual in Shushtar, one of the most salient symbols is the extensive use of green in both costumes and ceremonial objects. This raises the question of its significance: what does the colour green represent within the context of this ritual? Among the people of Shushtar, green carries distinct cultural connotations. The widespread use of green in the Beyragh-zanun ritual mainly represents the local culture and traditional beliefs of the Shushtar community, despite the common assumption that it originates from its sacred connotations in Shi’a<sup>16</sup> religious practice.

---

<sup>16</sup> Shi’a is the second-largest branch of Islam, whose followers hold that leadership of the Muslim community belongs to the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his cousin and son-in-law, Ali.

In the Shushtari dialect, the word “*Souz*,” which signifies the colour green, conveys the idea of luck and auspicious fortune. When offering well-wishes, locals say, “*Bakhtet Souz Ba*,” which can be interpreted as “may your fortune be auspicious.” Green is considered so propitious that, in many traditional Shushtari ceremonies, including *Hana-bandan*<sup>17</sup> and old weddings, the bride’s and groom’s clothes were often made from green fabrics. Various elements of the bridal chamber<sup>18</sup> (*Hejleh* in Iran), such as the door, bedding, curtains, and in some cases even the bride’s and groom’s shoes, were commonly green, reflecting the colour’s cultural and symbolic significance within the community (Nirumand 1976: 260).

In past Hana-bandan ceremonies in Shushtar, not only the bride and groom but also some guests wore green clothes. Even the containers used for holding the henna were decorated with various green ornaments, including ribbons and lace. One notable moment in these traditional weddings involved the bride’s father wrapping a green fabric around the bride’s waist or arm, accompanied by the dancing and celebratory participation of the attendees. In contemporary Shushtari weddings, although Hana-bandan, engagement, and marriage ceremonies are now generally observed together rather than as separate events, the colour green remains a prominent symbolic element, with the bridal car and even guests often adorned in green fabrics.

However, since this colour has represented happiness and auspicious fortune among the people of Shushtar throughout history, what is the significance of the widespread use of green in this traditional Shushtar ceremony? And is the raising of a green flag during this ceremony considered a symbolic act?

It is evident that the green flag of Shushtar serves as a symbolic emblem. By placing it on the roof of the pilgrim’s house, the people of Shushtar seek to convey publicly the joy and auspicious fortune of the individual who has completed the Hajj pilgrimage and to express their celebration of this blessed occasion. Similarly, by wearing green clothing and participating in the ceremony, the community shares in the pilgrim’s happiness and auspicious fortune, partaking in the blessings and goodwill bestowed upon them.

#### 4.2 Performers

It is evident that the performer constitutes one of the most essential components of any form of performance. Some theorists, such as Stella Adler, even maintain that the actor or performer is the most significant element in a performance, as their task is to interpret and embody the very soul of the work for the audience (Malague 2013: 90). Furthermore, most scholars who have examined the origins of theatre argue that the earliest form of performance in history emerged when a performer presented an act before one or several spectators. This perspective highlights the essential role of the performer in the realization of the performance and in communicating its underlying essence.

However, this key element in the Beyragh-zanun (Flag-raising) ritual possesses a distinctive characteristic. The performers of this ceremony can be categorised into three groups: those who carry out the act of raising the flag, the ritual singer (Chavoushi-khan), and the dancers who perform the traditional local dance known as Gombeh.

Interestingly, the main performers of this ritual are the children and family members of the pilgrim (Haji), who play the most significant role in the ceremony by conducting the flag-raising ritual at the beginning of the event. It should be noted, however, that since Beyragh-zanun is a religious and Islamic ritual, only the male children, grandsons, or even sons-in-law of the pilgrim are permitted to perform this part of the ceremony. In

---

<sup>17</sup> Hana-bandan is a traditional Iranian pre-wedding ceremony where henna is applied to the bride, groom, and guests. Often called “Henna Night,” it is typically held the night before the wedding to bring good luck, fertility, and protection to the newlywed couple.

<sup>18</sup> Hejleh is a traditional Iranian bridal chamber, lavishly decorated with flowers, mirrors, and fabrics for the wedding night.

addition, several others usually assist the performers by preparing plaster and cement for fixing the flag, and they too may, in a sense, be regarded as part of the stage crew.

However, simultaneously with the raising of the flag, three other groups also participate in the performance: the musical ensemble, the singer (Chavoushi-khan), and the group of dancers. The singer of the ceremony (Chavoushi-khan) is usually a professional performer, while the dancers are typically guests of the event, whether acquaintances or strangers. Despite the religious atmosphere of the ritual, both groups of performers showcase local and traditional Shushtari music and dances, highlighting the significance of these traditions in the cultural identity of the region's people.

It is customary for women to play the *Dayereh*<sup>19</sup> (frame drum) or *Daf*<sup>20</sup> during this ceremony; however, men occasionally take on the role of musicians as well. Interestingly, men who played the Dayereh or Daf in this ritual were often selected from among those who displayed feminine behaviour and speech. In the Shushtari dialect, they were referred to as *Zanuni*, meaning “one who behaves like a woman.”

### 4.3 Spectators

The audience plays an essential role in any performance, significantly influencing its overall atmosphere. More than simply being present, the audience becomes part of the shared artistic experience and the performative space, shaping the creative process. Many forms of performance also regard the audience as a crucial measure of the performance's quality and impact.

More importantly, the presence of the audience and the impressions they take from the performance play a significant role in preserving and promoting culture and art, as well as strengthening the relationship between society and art. Without an audience, a performance cannot realise its full potential for influence, nor can it develop a deep and meaningful connection between the artist and the community.

However, this important element of the Beyragh-zanun ritual has unique characteristics. The audience can be divided into two groups based on their mode of participation. The first group includes the Haji's family, relatives, and acquaintances who were invited to the ceremony in advance. The second group consists of members of the public who, upon seeing the flag being raised on the roof of the pilgrim's house, come to the venue and watch the Beyragh-zanun performance.

The relationship between the audience and the performance in the Beyragh-zanun ritual is noteworthy. Spectators may join the performance at any time, as no “fourth wall” or boundary separates the audience, performers, and stage. Furthermore, some participants actively join the dancers during the ceremony, performing the traditional Gombeh dance and transforming the Beyragh-zanun ritual into an interactive performance.

These participants, who can be considered a type of performer-spectator, exert a profound influence on the collective and participatory creation of the ritual, and the aesthetic quality and overall effectiveness of the performance largely depend on their involvement. Participation varies among spectators; some join the local singer, or Chavoushi-khan, during traditional song renditions, singing along and, in doing so, assuming the role of performer-spectators through communal participation.

### 4.4 Stage

Another essential element of any performance is undoubtedly the stage, particularly its design and arrangement. Although this component is non-verbal and belongs to the visual aspects of performance, it has a

---

<sup>19</sup> Dayereh is an Iranian circular frame drum with jingles, played with the fingers and palms in traditional and folk music.

<sup>20</sup> Daf is a large Iranian frame drum with metal rings or chains attached to the inner rim, commonly used in Sufi and folk music.

profound influence on conveying the thematic content and symbolic meaning to the audience. Thoughtful and effective stage design can foster a deeper integration with other performance elements, the dramatic text, and the underlying philosophy of the performance.

In the Beyragh-zanun ritual, there are two distinct performance spaces. The first is the courtyard of the house, which accommodates the spectators, the singer, and the performer-spectators. In this space, the singer, known as the Chavoushi-khan, stands among the audience and sings the traditional Chavoushi.

The second stage is the rooftop of the house, where the children of the pilgrim raise the flag. This rooftop performance serves as a prominent symbolic centrepiece, drawing the audience's attention and emphasising the ritual's ceremonial significance.

#### 4.5 Stage Props

In the Beyragh-zanun ritual, several stage props play a direct role in the performance, including the flags, the ceremonial costumes along with the fabrics used to make them, known as Khal'ati, the microphone, and the Dayereh, a frame drum called "*Dareh*" in the Shushtari dialect. These objects are essential for the execution of the ritual and contribute to its overall structure and visual composition.

Among these, the white and green flags are the most prominent stage elements. Their bases are first placed in henna and then installed at the highest point of the house using plaster and cement. Rooftops have traditionally been selected for flag placement because they offer maximum visibility to local residents. Beyond their symbolic and ceremonial significance, raising the flags signals to the community that the ritual is underway, serving as a clear visual cue for the start of the event.

Among the essential stage elements with a visual function are the colourful garments, mainly green or white. Sewn from fabrics gifted by the Haji, these garments, known as Khal'ati, enhance the visual splendor and beauty of the ritual. They are typically purchased by the Haji for members of the family prior to the ceremony. Occasionally, the Haji only covers the cost, leaving the purchase to the family members.

Another important element is the microphone, which the Chavoushi-khan uses to sing local songs and project his voice to the spectators. The singing is accompanied by the Dareh, a local percussion instrument that adds rhythm and energy to the ceremony, creating an energetic atmosphere.

Due to the performative nature of this ritual, the microphone also has an additional function. Through the Chavoushi-khan's singing, it announces the start of the Beyragh-zanun ceremony, making neighbours and passersby aware of the event. Symbolically, the ritual reflects the community's belief in and participation in the blessings attained by the Haji, through which they also hope to receive similar good fortune.

#### 4.6 Text

The text of this performance is primarily composed of Chavoushi poems<sup>21</sup>, which reflect the cultural and religious beliefs of the people of Shushtar. Most Chavoushi verses are sung solo by the Chavoushi-khan, while at times the audience joins in, singing the verses in unison with the khan. These poems are religious in nature and are rooted in the spiritual traditions of the people of Shushtar.

The following are some poems that are chanted during the Beyragh-zanun ritual.

(1) Haji, come tonight; Haji, come when it is time to sleep.

---

<sup>21</sup> Chavoushi poems are the traditional folk verses sung by Chavoushi-khan during the Beyragh-zanun ritual.

For you I prepare the boiling water.

I prepare it for you so that you come in joy and delight.

I cook the *O-Bengesht*<sup>22</sup> for you so that you come with joy and delight.

I arrange your bed, Haji, you who are the crown of my head.

You are the treasure of my life and everything, Haji.

For the sake of your children, Haji,

Pray for your neighbours in Medina<sup>23</sup> and Mecca<sup>24</sup>. (Mohseni 2017: 4–5)<sup>25</sup>

(2) First, send blessings upon Mustafa (another name of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam) in Medina.

Second, send blessings upon the Lion of God (title of Imam Ali, the first Shia Imam) in Najaf.

In Karbala, curse the accursed Shimr (killer of Imam Hussein, the third Shia Imam).

In Tus (an ancient city in Khorasan, near modern Mashhad), send blessings upon Gharib al-Ghorba (title of Imam Reza, the eighth Shia Imam).

Upon the eleven sons of Ali ibn Abi-Talib (the first Shia Imam),

Send blessings individually upon each one (the other eleven Shia Imams).

Send blessings upon Muhammad with pure beauty,

And upon that newly risen sun of the heavens.

(3) A flower cannot shine in the presence of Muhammad,

The shine of flower fades beside Muhammad's face.

The flower may grow weary from autumn, yet

It remains in the shadow of Muhammad.

The Iwan of Najaf (a city home to the shrine of Imam Ali, the first Shia Imam) possesses remarkable splendor,

Look at Haidar (title of Imam Ali, the first Shia Imam), what a magnificent shrine he has.

Kaaba (birthplace of Imam Ali, the first Shia Imam), do not take pride in yourself, for from eternity,

Everyone has their own designated place.

---

<sup>22</sup> A traditional Shushtari dish

<sup>23</sup> Medina is the second holiest city in Islam, located in Saudi Arabia, where the Prophet Muhammad is buried.

<sup>24</sup> Mecca is the holiest city in Islam, located in Saudi Arabia, and the site of the Kaaba towards which Muslims direct their prayers.

<sup>25</sup> All Persian quotations are our own translations.

(4) Bring me to the flower, or bring the flower to me (the “flower” referring to the Haji).

Let there be a conversation between me and the flower (the Haji).

Scatter flowers on the path of the Hajis.

How beautiful tonight is, as we perform the Beyragh-zanun ritual.

I cherish your name, my dear; your name is so beautiful.

Everyone who gave you your name should have their tongue gilded.

Tonight, the night of Eid al-Adha, is so delightful.

Journeying to the House of God is sweet for my beloved.

Sprinkle rosewater along every alley and corner.

It is time to perform the Beyragh-zanun for the Haji and announce to all

Scatter flowers, scatter flowers on the path of the Hajis.

How beautiful it is tonight, as we perform the Beyragh-zanun ritual.

You are the dearest of my life, always within my heart.

Your love has taken deep root in my heart.

From the House of God (the Kaaba) comes the scent of a spring flower (the Haji).

When, then, will my beloved come to me?

#### 4.7 Costume and Makeup

Since the Beyragh-zanun ritual has held significant importance for the people of Shushtar from the past to the present, men and women prepare for participation by grooming themselves and attending carefully to their appearance before the ceremony. Men typically trim and style their hair and beards, while women enhance their appearance with makeup. These preparatory practices reflect their intention to appear well presented and respectful when taking part in this longstanding ritual tradition.

For example, in the past, some women in Shushtar applied makeup, which included the use of Kohl<sup>26</sup> around the eyes. Additionally, girls and women traditionally used a type of chewing stick, known locally as a *Dandan-sab*, for oral hygiene and to impart a red tint to their lips, although this practice is now less common. These chewing sticks were made by shredding the bark of walnut tree trunks, and by soaking them for a short period in water, they could be used effectively for oral care while also giving the lips a natural red hue.

Young women traditionally endeavored to present themselves in the best possible manner, aiming to appear more attractive to guests. Today, however, women and girls commonly visit beauty salons, dye their hair, and groom their eyebrows and facial features. Some also decorate their necks or chests with tattoos.

Regarding the attire of women participating in the Beyragh-zanun ritual, it should be noted that traditionally, their main clothing consisted of long stockings, flared dancing trousers with decorative borders,

---

<sup>26</sup> Kohl is a dark powder, traditionally made from galena, used as eyeliner and eye cosmetic across the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.

known locally as *Tonban-qeri*, and green dresses. Women traditionally adorned themselves with numerous and large pieces of jewelry during the ritual, a practice that persists to the present day. Today, however, modern green garments have largely replaced traditional attire. In the past, men would groom themselves at home before the ritual, whereas today most tend to visit barbershops instead. They typically wear clean or new clothing and apply fragrance in order to participate in this longstanding religious ceremony in a presentable manner.

## V. PERFORMATIVE ELEMENTS OF THE BEYRAGH-ZANUN RITUAL

### 5.1 The Beyragh-Zanun Ritual and Interactive Theatres

Beyond its performative aspects and nature, the Beyragh-zanun ritual is characterized by distinctive performative features, forming a unique and multifaceted performance. A key factor shaping the nature of any performing art is the type of engagement and interaction between the audience and the stage. In this regard, the Beyragh-zanun ritual establishes a distinctive performative structure, creating a subtle boundary between the audience and the performance.

For instance, in certain parts of the ritual, such as the installation of the flag, the performers are limited to male family members or male relatives of the Haji. Fixed roles, including the Chavoushi-khan and the music ensemble, are predefined for the performance. Nevertheless, once the Chavoushi-khan begins singing and performing during the ceremony, no clear boundary remains between the audience and the stage, as every spectator can actively participate through dancing and singing in unison with the Chavoushi-khan. The Chavoushi-khan further performs in a manner that encourages audience interaction and may even directly invite spectators to join, promoting active audience participation in the ritual.

The participatory manner of the Beyragh-zanun ritual bears notable similarities to other forms of interactive performance commonly found in the world of theatre and performing arts. It is important to recognise that, in addition to analysing the audience's role, other factors must be taken into account. These include the foundational principles and primary objectives of the performing arts, as well as their conventional functions. These factors must be considered in any comparative study with interactive theatre.

In the contemporary world, many people are familiar with participatory theatre forms, including Forum Theatre<sup>27</sup>, Invisible Theatre<sup>28</sup>, Image Theatre<sup>29</sup>, and Legislative Theatre<sup>30</sup>, all devised by Augusto Boal. In these forms, spectators engage directly in the performance, effectively taking on both the roles of performer and audience (Search for Common Ground 2007: 7-9). However, for several reasons, these participatory theatre forms bear little substantive similarity to the Beyragh-zanun ritual or comparable ritual performances.

First, the Beyragh-zanun is a form of ritual performance, and, unlike these interactive theatre forms, it is not categorised as theatre. Second, the aims pursued by Augusto Boal and his interactive theatre forms differ

---

<sup>27</sup> Forum Theatre is an interactive performance method developed by Augusto Boal as part of his Theatre of the Oppressed. Actors present a scene of oppression, after which audience members ("spect-actors") are invited to stop the action, replace the protagonist, and improvise alternative solutions. A neutral facilitator called the "Joker" guides the process, transforming the stage into a rehearsal space for social change.

<sup>28</sup> Invisible Theatre is a technique developed by Augusto Boal within his Theatre of the Oppressed. Actors perform a scripted scene centred on a social issue in a public space—such as a street, café, or shop—without revealing that it is theatre. The unsuspecting bystanders become unwitting participants, and their spontaneous reactions shape the event. The aim is to provoke public debate and expose hidden forms of oppression in everyday life, blurring the line between art and reality.

<sup>29</sup> Image Theatre is a technique from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in which participants use their bodies to create frozen images (tableaux) representing experiences of oppression, relationships, or abstract ideas. These silent images are then "dynamised"—brought to life through movement, transition, or alteration by other participants—allowing individuals to explore and rehearse social change without relying on spoken language.

<sup>30</sup> Legislative Theatre extends Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre into the political arena. Developed during his term as a city councillor in Rio de Janeiro (1993–1997), it transforms interventions proposed by 'spect-actors' into actual draft legislation. The stage thus becomes a direct tool of participatory democracy, linking theatrical rehearsal to real-world law-making.

fundamentally from the purposes of audience participation in the Beyragh-zanun ritual. Boal's intention in involving spectators in the performance process is explicitly social and political, seeking to promote gradual structural change, empower communities in the face of injustice and social inequality, and raise awareness through experiential engagement (White 2013: 20-21). By contrast, it is evident that participants in the Beyragh-zanun ritual do not engage with such objectives, and the conceptual foundations of the ritual are entirely distinct from the socially and politically oriented framework of Boal's performances.

Third, in Boal's theatre forms, the spectator typically takes on an influential role within the dramatic narrative and is confronted with contemporary social situations and issues (Boal 2008: 135). However, the Beyragh-zanun ritual lacks this type of participation. Fourth, Boal's performances generally follow theatrical and narrative structures, such as those in Forum Theatre (Boal 2002: 260-263) or Legislative Theatre (Boal 2005: 50-51), and they carry explicit educational and social functions (Osnes 2001: 40). By contrast, the Beyragh-zanun ritual possesses neither such pedagogical or social aims nor any theatrical or narrative form.

## 5.2 The Beyragh-Zanun Ritual and Performance Art

The question arises, however, as to what type of performance the Beyragh-zanun ritual can be considered. Given the performative characteristics of the Beyragh-zanun ritual, addressing this question requires first an overview of the definitions of performance art. One of the most notable definitions is provided by the Encyclopedia Britannica, which highlights the distinctive features of this form of performing art. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, performance art is "a time-based art form that typically features a live presentation to an audience or to onlookers (as on a street) and draws on such arts as acting, poetry, music, dance, and painting. It is generally an event rather than an artifact, by nature ephemeral, though it is often recorded on video and by means of still photography" (Wainwright n.d.: para. 1-3).

The term 'performance art,' which since the early 1970s has been applied to a wide range of performative activities such as Happenings<sup>31</sup>, Physical Theatre<sup>32</sup>, and Body Art<sup>33</sup>, has from the outset placed considerable emphasis on the body-centered nature of this form of performing art. This emphasis can be observed in many performance artworks of the 1970s and 1980s, a period during which Futurists<sup>34</sup> and Dadaists<sup>35</sup> sought to instigate

---

<sup>31</sup> A Happening is a loosely structured, participatory performance event that emerged in the late 1950s, closely associated with American artist Allan Kaprow. Blurring the boundaries between art and everyday life, a Happening typically unfolds in non-theatrical spaces and involves a series of scripted or spontaneous actions, often without a clear narrative. Audience members may become active participants, making each event unique and unrepeatable.

<sup>32</sup> Physical Theatre is a performance style in which the body serves as the primary medium of storytelling, often prioritising movement, gesture, and visual imagery over spoken text. Drawing on traditions such as mime, commedia dell'arte, and contemporary dance, it emerged as a distinct form in the late twentieth century through the work of practitioners like Jacques Lecoq and companies such as DV8 Physical Theatre.

<sup>33</sup> Body Art is a kind of performance and visual art in which the artist's own body becomes the primary medium and subject. Emerging in the late 1960s, it often involves acts of endurance, self-modification, or ritual, challenging boundaries between art and lived experience. Key practitioners include Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, and Gina Pane.

<sup>34</sup> Futurism was an early twentieth-century avant-garde movement founded by Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti with his 1909 Futurist Manifesto. It celebrated speed, technology, youth, and violence while rejecting tradition and the past. Spanning painting, poetry, theatre, and music, Futurist performance was deliberately provocative, often incorporating noise, simultaneous actions, and direct audience confrontation, laying crucial groundwork for later experimental theatre and performance art.

<sup>35</sup> Dadaism was an avant-garde movement born in 1916 at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich as a radical protest against the rationality and nationalism that had led to the First World War. Rejecting conventional aesthetics, Dada artists embraced nonsense, chance, and absurdity. In performance, this took the form of chaotic

a revolution in the performing arts by breaking traditional artistic frameworks. These innovations not only highlighted the centrality of the body but also allowed for audience participation and fostered interaction between the performance, the performer, and the audience (Wainwright n.d.: para. 1–3).

Performance art is fundamentally oriented toward challenging and surpassing established theatrical structures through various methods. Conceived as a live and inherently ephemeral medium, it is intentionally designed to resist commercialization and places primary emphasis on the artistic dimensions of the work and its interaction with society. From the outset, the founders of this form recognised that the permanence of artworks could allow market forces<sup>36</sup> and economic interests to exert influence over their artistic significance. For this reason, performance art seeks to counter such commodification and the tendency to convert artistic creations into fixed objects intended for museum display, a process that reduces them to items defined primarily by monetary value (Ayerbe 2018: 1).

Richard Schechner's definition is particularly notable in this context. He maintains that performances are composed of restored behaviours, that is, actions that are reconstructed or reenacted. This notion suggests that individuals repeatedly practice these behaviours in advance to enact them, whether the behaviours involved are physical, nonphysical, or verbal (Schechner 2006: 28).

Schechner emphasizes the communicative dimension of performances and argues that a central criterion for identifying and distinguishing them lies in their inherently interactive nature. In his view, performances come into being and acquire meaning only through action, communication, and engagement with an audience. To exemplify this concept, Schechner offers the scenario of a mother teaching her child to eat. The mother demonstrates the process by raising a spoon to her mouth and opening it. She then proceeds to feed the child, who, initially a spectator, becomes an active participant through a reciprocal exchange. Schechner interprets this set of actions as a performance because the child, who initially functions as a spectator, gradually enters into a reciprocal exchange with the mother and ultimately assumes the role of a spectator-performer, thereby contributing to the continuation of the performative act (Schechner 2006: 29).

Richard Schechner considers rituals a form of performance art. He argues that ritual actions are reenacted and transmittable behaviours that are coded and symbolically structured. Accordingly, rituals function as a society's collective memory, embodied through repeated practices that can be continually performed by successive generations.

Schechner further suggests that performance emerges from the intersection of ritual and play. It can be acknowledged as behaviour that has been ritualized and formalized (Schechner 2006: 52). For performers, in other words, engaging in performance art involves role-playing within a structured spectacle that encompasses reenacted and stabilized actions similar to those found in rituals.

In performance art, certain actions and forms are fixed and specific. A performer may, for instance, stand on a platform and ask spectators to place objects into the performer's hands. According to Schechner, such stabilized behaviours constitute ritualized and fixed actions. At the same time, however, the performer can freely play and perform these fixed actions in various manners with the participation of the spectators. From Schechner's

---

evenings featuring simultaneous poetry, sound poems, absurd sketches, and direct provocation of the audience, profoundly influencing the development of later experimental theatre and performance art.

<sup>36</sup> Market forces refer to the economic factors of supply and demand that determine the price, quantity, and distribution of goods and services within a free market. In cultural and artistic contexts, the term is often used to describe the growing pressure to prioritise commercial viability and profitability over aesthetic, social, or political aims.

perspective, this characteristic represents an interaction between free play and stabilized, ritual-like actions within performance art.

However, based on these definitions, the question arises as to whether the Beyragh-zanun ritual in Shushtar can be considered a form of performance art. Clearly, answering this question requires examining the key characteristics of performance art and assessing the extent to which its definitions align with the Beyragh-zanun ritual.

If we consider Schechner's definition of performance art, the Beyragh-zanun ritual can be regarded as a form of performance. Firstly, Schechner regards all rituals as a type of performance. Secondly, the Beyragh-zanun ritual, as defined by Schechner, involves both physical and non-physical actions that are reenacted and stabilized, transmitted from generation to generation among the people of Shushtar through teaching. Additionally, regarding audience engagement, the ritual is performed with the active participation of spectators.

Even when the Beyragh-zanun ritual is examined through alternative definitions of performance art, it must still be regarded as a form of performance art. This conclusion arises from the fact that the ritual aligns closely with the fundamental characteristics of performance art. It is time-based and follows an organized temporal structure. It is body-centered and consists of distinct physical actions. It is ephemeral and limited in duration. It is also performed outside a conventional theatrical stage and incorporates direct audience participation. Furthermore, performance art frequently draws upon various artistic forms such as music, dance, and vocal expression, all of which are also present in the Beyragh-zanun ritual. Therefore, because the Beyragh-zanun ritual in Shushtar embodies all the essential features associated with performance art, it can be identified as an interactive form of performance art rooted in the longstanding national and religious traditions of the people of Shushtar.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The Beyragh-zanun ritual in Shushtar includes various performative aspects and elements, such as performers, stage, spectators, text, symbols, stage props, costumes, and makeup. Therefore, it can be considered a form of religious performative ritual. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the various symbolic elements employed in this performance are all derived from the culture and beliefs of the people of Shushtar. Notable examples include the colour green, which represents auspicious fortune in Shushtari culture, as well as the Chavoushi chants performed in the Shushtari dialect. Such characteristics collectively signify that, over time, the ritual has developed a stable performative structure shaped through the interweaving of religious elements with the indigenous cultural traditions of Shushtar.

This ritual can be categorised as a form of participatory performance art, in which the spectators play an active and essential role in shaping the performance. The people of Shushtar believe that by taking part in the ritual, they can share in the auspicious fortune and blessings bestowed upon the Haji. For this reason, their presence at the Beyragh-zanun ceremony is understood as a religious act expressed through locally rooted symbolic practices. This participatory aspect also transforms certain spectators into performer-spectators, whose involvement, including collective chanting or rhythmic dance, greatly enhances the visual presence and overall performative impact of the ritual.

However, one of the most remarkable features of the Beyragh-zanun ritual is that, despite being a religious and Islamic ceremony, it incorporates elements such as the Shushtari Gombah dance, which are rarely observed in Islamic religious rituals. The incorporation of dance persists as part of the ritual, despite being prohibited in Islam and considered sinful for Muslims.

The performance of indigenous instruments, such as the Dayereh, which contradicts Islamic injunctions against music, can be seen as further evidence of the unique paradox within the ritual. This paradox results from the historical interweaving of religious elements with the local culture of Shushtar, and even the Shushtari people themselves have long regarded their traditional music and dance as both a religious and a culturally rooted ritual performance.

The Beyragh-zanun ritual brings together longstanding local traditions and religious elements, framing

its performance as a collective commemoration of religious heritage and indigenous culture among the people of Shushtar. Therefore, it has preserved its significance over the years. These performative aspects and elements of the ritual, which hold religious and local significance, have also served to transmit indigenous and religious beliefs and traditions to subsequent generations. In this regard, they carry significant spiritual and intangible value for the people of Shushtar. The Beyragh-zanun ritual can be categorised as an interactive form of religious and indigenous performance art and features various performative elements. Over the course of time, it has developed by blending religious traditions with the indigenous culture of Shushtar. Therefore, the ritual embodies the indigenous and religious values, beliefs, and cultural heritage of the people of Shushtar.

## REFERENCES

- [1] H. Algul, *The blessed days and nights of the Islamic year*, Translated by J.L. Kandur, Somerset, NJ: The Light publishing, 2005).
- [2] F. Mohseni, "A Study of the Beyragh-Zanan Ritual in Khuzestan (with Emphasis on Dezful County) [Barrasi-ye Ayin-e Beraq-zanan dar Khuzestan (ba Ta'kid bar Shahrestan-e Dezful)]", *Proc. International Conference on Hajj Throughout History*, 2017, 1–10 <https://elmnet.ir/doc/21051045-81381> (in Persian).
- [3] Merriam-Webster, Performing Arts, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/performing\\_arts](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/performing_arts) (accessed September 26, 2025).
- [4] A. Schaeffner, *Histoire des spectacles: Encyclopédie de la Pléiade, Vol. 1* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965). Persian translation by N. Hamadani and A. Mosta'an (Tehran: Namayesh Publishing, 2004).
- [5] O.G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre, Vol. 1* (New York: Allyn and Bacon, 1977). Persian translation by H. Azadivar (Tehran: Morvarid Publishing, 2001).
- [6] E. Rozik, *The Roots of Theater: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002).
- [7] M.B. Nirumand, *A Lexical Dictionary of the Shushtari Dialect [Farhang-e Vazhe-name'i az Guyesh-e Shushtari]* (Tehran: Farhangestan-e Zaban-e Iran, 1976) (in Persian).
- [8] R. Malague, *An Actress Prepares: Women and "the Method"* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).
- [9] Search for Common Ground, *Participatory Theatre for Conflict Transformation: Training Manual* (Washington, DC: Search for Common Ground, 2007).
- [10] G. White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- [11] A. Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, translated by C.A. McBride, M.O. Leal McBride and E. Fryer (London: Pluto Press, 2008).
- [12] A. Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, translated by A. Jackson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).
- [13] A. Boal, *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics*, translated by A. Jackson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005).
- [14] B. Osnes, *Acting: An International Encyclopedia*, consulting editor S. Gill (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001).
- [15] L.S. Wainwright, Performance Art, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/performance-art> (accessed September 26, 2025).
- [16] N. Ayerbe, The ephemeral and its materialisations: Towards a redefinition of performance art, *MAP – Media | Archive | Performance*, 9(1), 2018, 1–7.
- [17] R. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).