

Iranian Theatre as Means of Intervention: The Intercultural Discourse in *Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!*



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Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!

By Sepideh Shokri Poori

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How does theatre intervene in the social and political life of a society that suffers from the existence of a totalitarian regime? How does Iranian society perceive its cultural and local wealth? These are some questions which this article will attempt to answer through the analysis of the play *Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!* (2009) by ??????? (Titowak) Theatre Group. The Titowak is a black and white bird with a red tip that lives near water. According to legend, the Titowak is the earth's savior and when everybody is sleeping, it guards the earth.

What most requires interpretation in this play are the intercultural aspects that correspond to the cultural and ethnic diversity of Iran. The work of Titowak is an attempt to achieve its meaning through the aesthetic local forms (such as the Zâr (???) ritual) obtained from the mixed area of ??????? (Hormozgan, province of the Persian Gulf). It is a hybrid image of Iranian, Arab, Indian and even African culture. In *Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!* Ebrahim Poshtekoohi (??????), the director, remodels a Western text, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, according to Iranian sociopolitical specifics, using performance traditions of Southern Iran to create a different experience for the spectator. It is a theatre that engages the spectator in an artistic event and invites him/her to have a critical look at the current situation of Iran while trying to remove the subjectivity of its director.

Titowak and the Art of Southern Iran

Since its foundation in 1997, the Titowak Theatre Group has sought a different form of theatre. Their works attempt to reconcile the rituals of southern Iran with the modern theatre, and to present an amalgam of dance, music, and local traditions. Their practices are, on the one hand, to protect the Iranian rituals from extinction, and on the other hand, to exceed the limits of imposed censorship and to bring the spectator into a sociopolitical commitment. The works of Titowak are attempts to utilize both an interdisciplinary and an intercultural approach. Their works are interdisciplinary, because they build the discourse by bringing on stage dramatic text, music, dance, rituals (like the Zâr) and theatre. Their works are also intercultural because they are derived from different cultures (such as Iranian, Arab, Indian and African) and multiple methods of acting and styles (such as Kabuki, Kathakali, Butoh and the traditional, Persian religious drama the Ta'zyeh).

There is a link between this interdisciplinarity of the artistic practices compiled by Titowak and the interculturality of dramatic texts and theatrical styles that comprise the performative universe of their works. This explains how the creations of this theatre group are involved in Iranian today society as an informative and committed force. In most productions of Titowak, post-revolutionary Iran—with its cultural traditions, its sociopolitical quarrels as well as its ethnic diversity and its minorities—is reflected in the adaptation of Western texts (e.g. *Macbeth*, *The Divine Comedy*, the Mexican novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, etc). This intertextuality is rooted, first, in the hybrid culture of southern Iran (both religious and linguistic), as well as in the dramaturgical strategies that the director applies in his representations to circumvent censorship.

My study looks at the interculturality of *Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!* and its attempted intervention in current and political concerns. Adapted from Shakespeare's play, this performance reveals a sociopolitical commitment of its author to seize the theatre scene as a propaganda device. I will try to study these intercultural elements to understand their theatricality, as well as the discursive policy put forward through their performativity. My hypothesis stresses the fact that even if this adaptation borrows from the Zâr ritual and employs intercultural elements, it is not only for aesthetic

reasons, but also to expose the face of Iran today as it suffers from the absence of freedom of expression and lives under the oversight of a dictatorship.

Interculturality in the Work of Titowak

The Titowak Theatre Group often adapts Western texts to represent the Iranian sociopolitical context using southern Iranian rituals. This interculturality is a metaphorical and ironic way to overcome censorship while highlighting the serious problems (such as despotism, the brain drain, etc.) of Iran. In this scenic fusion that mixes dance, music, ritual, and text, Titowak shows the evocative force of theatre by moving the subject elsewhere: that is, out of Iran or outside the post-revolutionary era. Thus, this cultural collage, which is related to the interdisciplinary nature of Titowak's work, leads the spectator to think about the current situation of his/her native country:

The Titowak Manifesto, "Theater is home to all arts" presents its mission in these terms:

We, in Titowak theater, believe that the age of macro-exemplum and being a follower of a style is ending and use of micro-stories and a mixture of different styles and methods in performance will be helpful; therefore we give credit to a kind of collage which could help to form a new model and form, which is original and at the same time novel and exquisite; [...] In a world where active participation is the paradigm of the age, we have been following the goal of reaching an engaged audience and even to go a step further to coin the term "Author hearings" in our theatrical shows, and we do believe that theatre is a matter of human experience. By hearing, they are engaging in it and this theater should continue in their mind. [\[1\]](#)

Indirect political discourse, which can be a means of intervention in Iranian public life, is manifested through the interculturality of Titowak's works. It is precisely this aspect that deserves to be analyzed in *Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!* On the other hand, the importance protecting the Zâr from extinction also speaks to the social concerns of this theatre. The Zâr, which is a therapeutic and religious rite, has been used by the director for both aesthetic and thematic reasons.

To give an overview of the Zâr, we will look briefly at this ritual and how believers celebrate it in southern Iran. Subsequently, we will try to explain the link between the Zâr and the story of *Macbeth*, which allows the use of this ritual in the representation of this Shakespearean tragedy.

The Zâr, an Intercultural Ritual

In Hormozgan Province and the coastal regions of southern Iran, people believe in the existence of cruel and benevolent winds. The cruel winds, which Zâr makes depart, are considered the most aggressive and cause various diseases. According to local belief, the Zâr is a contagious wind and those who are affected by it can transmit their troubles to others. The Zâr's victim would never get rid of it, but he or she can tame the wind, which lets the victim gain quiet. In order to relieve the victim, special ceremonies are held by a leader and other people previously affected by the Zâr. The Chief, called ??????? (Baba Zâr, Papa Zâr) or ??????? (Mamane Zâr, Mom Zâr), have already been possessed by the wind and managed to control it. He/she knows how to help others affected by the wind and aid them to master it. During the ceremony, ??? ???(the people of the air, the possessed) gather around the patient and burn aromatic herbs. Baba Zâr asks winds to grant him time to organize the ceremony, which he calls the "game." The

leader begins the ritual singing incantations in dialects or in the form of melodic sounds. He uses an unknown language made from a mixture of Persian, Arabic, Swahili and Indian. The Chief and people of the air dress all in white. They must also follow certain rules such as do not touch dead or do not consume alcohol. Throughout the Zâr ceremony, musicians play the drums. During the ritual, the Zâr expresses its requirements through the mouth of the victim. These may be limited to a few prayers and offerings (such as food and money) or something more serious like a sacrifice. When Zâr demands a sacrifice, Baba Zâr organizes another ceremony, usually in the evening, during which an animal such as a rooster, a goat or a sheep will be sacrificed. As soon as the sacrifice is finished, the people of the air, as well as Baba, drink the blood of the animal. Maryam Gharassou, who reported on the ritual in 2006, explains:

All those who have entered into a trance drink the warm blood of animal with water of rose and saffron. In reality, this is not the possessed person who drinks the blood of the sacrificed animal but his genius who draws a vital energy. This is the most amazing and the most touching part of the ceremony. For a few seconds, the ????? (winds) are embodied and become visible. Then the wind finally leaves his victim in peace. [...] Finally, a collective dinner prepared with the meat of the sacrifice encourages guests to forget the troubles of life for a few hours.[\[2\]](#)

The existence of many analogies (such as rituals and beliefs related to the Zâr) between the Iranian Zâr and that of the countries of the Horn of Africa like Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya suggest a common origin. It seems that the Zâr's practices and beliefs were born in Africa. In his book titled *Le culte du Zâr dans le sud de l'Iran (The cult of the Zâr in southern Iran)*, Modarressi says that the Zâr is a Persian word meaning *Lamentation* and was "used to designate the Zâr cult when it was introduced in the South of Iran by African sailors of the southeast coast of Africa in the 16th century."[\[3\]](#) In the nineteenth century, when there was slavery traffic, Africans were brought into Iran. However, to preserve their identity in this new country, they began to introduce their rituals like the Zâr.

In the twentieth century, with the beginning of modernization in Iran, the Government time forbade ritual practices and followers of the Zâr were forced to perform their rituals in secret. In addition, the development of medicine and education led the public to understand the causes of diseases such as epilepsy, depression, or infertility previously linked to the Zâr. These are two main reasons that have led to the disappearance of this cult in the coastal regions of Iran. Nevertheless, Zâr beliefs and practices continue to exist in Iran, as well as in some parts of the Middle East and Africa.

Macbeth and the Zâr

The tragedy of *Macbeth* is based on the actual story of a King of Scotland, but Shakespeare adds imaginary and supernatural events to his play while maintaining a documentary approach. In the plot of this tragedy, Macbeth, known for his courage and perseverance, general of the army of Duncan (King of Scotland), is led by three witches to seek the crown, which he gains by the crime of regicide and then maintains by a series of killings. The play presents many different themes: evil, betrayal, the soul tortured by madness, the tragic existence of humanity, and murder. According to Selima Lejiri, Macbeth may be said to embody the demonism, or even the dionysianism of pagan Greece. He has a passion for death and satisfies his desire by sacrificing everything to it. This taste for blood results in a condition between madness and crime. This seems to explain the Dionysian aspect of Macbeth where "madness (*mania* and *sparagmos*) form the common denominator of almost all the legends attached to dionysianism: God inflicts madness on his victim, generally for neglected or despised rites. Prey to dementia, the victim

commits murder.” On the other hand, in the Dionysian ritual of the *sparagmos*, meaning the tearing and ritual eating of an animal, resides a metaphorical sense: that of “mental bursting or what psychiatry would later call schizophrenia.”^[4] Haunted by a world producing shadows of his imagination, Macbeth becomes the emblematic figure of this psychosomatic tear.

Curiously, if one compares the tragedy of *Macbeth* with the Zâr ritual, a theme links the two: dementia. Macbeth is owned by insanity; He covets the Crown and to achieve his goal, expends the blood of his entourage. In the Zâr ritual, which is also a ceremony of people possessed by an evil spirit, the Chief of the Zâr is already affected by the wind, but he manages to control it. He becomes a leader of the possessed and tries to reconcile them with the winds. This means that the disease will never be cured, but the possessed are given relief.

The sacrifice of a victim is another common element between *Macbeth* and the Zâr. If the bellicose wind requires blood, the head of the ceremony sacrifices an animal and drinks its hot blood to quiet the soul. Likewise, Macbeth, to calm his paranoid mind, has needs for blood; he chooses his victims (King Duncan, Banquo, the wife of Macduff, etc.) and kills them to pacify his sick mind.

Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!

Produced in 2009, this play is a look at post-revolutionary Iran (1979): social injustice, dictatorship, the post-election protests, the immigration and desperation of young people. This drama deals with the emergence and the fall of a dictator, and the murders he commits during his reign. Ebrahim Poshtekoohi includes theatrical elements of Kabuki, Kathakali and Butoh, inspired by the character of Baba Zâr and people of the air, to illustrate the socio-political situation in Iran, as well as to circumvent censorship by transferring a European text into an Iranian context. Macbeth, to become Baba Zâr of Hormozgan, must shed the blood of King Duncan; however, his reign will be short and Macduff will kill him.

Interculturality is achieved through the aesthetic forms, like the beginning scene where Macbeth, in a Butoh style of dance, imitates the body rhythm of the Zâr (see *Figure 1*). This seems to announce, from the beginning, the mental illness of Macbeth as in the Zâr one phase is to identify the invader of the possessed spirit. The healer (Baba or Mamane Zâr) therefore asks the patient to do various body movements to summon the Zâr. When the Zâr is identified, the healer starts a conversation with it and tries to know what it wants.



Fig. 1: *Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!* (2009).
Photo: Reza Mousavi

Another element of the cultural mixing can be seen in the changing of names: Macbeth becomes Dav-Macbeth; Macduff, Mas-Macduff and Banqot, Mah-Banqot. The prefixes added to the Shakespearean characters' names are the abbreviations of real names of the actors. Through this set of names, interculturality becomes self-referential, an act of autopoiesis. The characters refer to themselves to show Iranian identities living in Iran today, who are responsible for the current event of their country.

The two witches come on the stage with Kathakali movements. They announce that major events will occur and that Dav-Macbeth will become the future Baba Zâr in the Hormozgan region. Thus, the music that accompanies this scene is a mixture of Indian music and ????? (Bandari, a form of dance from the Persian Gulf region) with rhythmic movements of the belly dance and the dance of South-Iranian Matelote. Then the spectator is invited to witness the imagination or the nightmares of Dav-Macbeth. He wears black and confronts the people of the air and King Duncan who all dressed in white (the color of the Zâr ceremony). Duncan (Baba Zâr) wears a local dress of the South with a silver mask symbolizing his royal status. He also has two bamboo canes. Lady Macbeth is present throughout this scene. She passes in front of the spectators with a handheld fan, which refers to the heat of the South and her disturbed mind. The next action shows the quarrel between Dav-Macbeth and Duncan during which the King loses one of the canes to the advantage of Dav-Macbeth. This image, accompanied by a red sheet, subtly means the assassination of the King. The red color is an essential element in this scene; it is the

symbol of murder and death (see *Figure II*).



Fig. II: *Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!* (2009).

Photo: Hasan Bradi

Regarding costume, the production adapted the habit of Shakespearean characters to the local culture: Boga, pants, and turban for men; Boubou, scarf and ????? (batooleh, a local form of burqa) for women. Thus, accessories that are used, such as the bamboo cane, the hookah, the clay vessel and woven straw, are all rooted in the local culture of the South (see *Figure III, IV*). These instruments are related to the ritual practices of Baba Zâr and replace the sword and Crown of King Duncan. These accessories thus provide other elements of mixed discourse in this production.



Fig. III: *Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!* (2009).
Photo: Roohollah Baloochi



Fig. IV: *Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!* (2009).
Photo: Abdolhossein Rezvani

The play tries to reconstitute the theme of dictatorship by borrowing the local aesthetic forms to supplement the indirect political discourse of the director. The dictatorship is well indicated through the paraphrase of the original dialogues, which seem to describe the current situation of Iran. This strategy allows the author to discuss the operations of dictatorship by using a Western classical model and still involve the spectator. It is thus a way to avoid the limitations of censorship. “The time has been/ That, when the brains were out, the man would die,/ And there an end,” Macbeth, the haunted dictator, laments. “But now they rise again/ With twenty mortal murders on their crowns/ And push from our stools.” The themes of dictatorship and resistance battle it out by using these paraphrased words and provide a critical perspective on the place of Supreme Leader in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Immigration, the other sociopolitical theme of this play, is represented through the image of shoes. Two actors, Dav-Macbeth and his valet, come on the scene employing the gestures of Kabuki; the valet who suspends shoes around his neck discuss with the master on this figure (see *Figure V*) which refers to two controversial symbolic ideas: evasion, since shoes are the symbol of the escapees and traitors who betrayed their homeland; immigration and exile, since they return to the idea of the “brain drain” that young people and intellectuals are leaving their country. Thus, the scene of suspended shoes becomes symbolic of betrayal and the obedience of the compatriots. Unfaithful to his friends, or even to his nation,

the valet obeys his master (imitating the dog's bark) and shows his contentment to pick up the loose shoes: "These are the shoes of escape, I picked them up so that those who try to flee Hormozgan, burn their soles of feet."



Fig. V: *Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!* (2009).
Photo: Mohammad-Reza Masandani

All these images express aspects of a totalitarian regime that gnaws at today's Iranian society. *Hey! Macbeth, only the first dog knows why it is barking!* is a sociopolitical tableau where the Titowak company, using intercultural elements, involves the spectator, skillfully combining a Western text and Iranian national reality. The treatment of the original text and its adaptation to Iranian reality represents an intercultural staging on two aspects: the form and the content. Thus, this adaptation becomes one of the means used to overcome censorship.

There is no wonder that a cultural text like *Macbeth* has been associated with realities like the dictatorship and immigration of Iranian society today. In a quest for new aesthetic expression, this work tries to create a theatricality that indirectly involves in the life of the spectator. It is a theatre displaying sociopolitical commitment in its performativity and not political propaganda.

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Footnotes:

[1] Titowak website. http://www.titowak.com/?page_id=174. Accessed April 24, 2016.

[2] “Rituel du Zâr et chants Bâssanak de Qeshm (Iran)”. www.theatreonline.com/spectacle/Rituel-du-ZÂR-et-chants-Bassanak-de-Qeshm-Iran-/14349. Accessed April 28, 2016.

[3] Modarressi, *Le culte du Zâr*, 149.

[4] “Dionysisme et démonisme: l’excès dans *Macbeth*”. *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare*. <https://shakespeare.revues.org/1066?lang=en>. Accessed April 28, 2016.



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