

Reviving Qanats to Quench Iran’s Thirst



Shahzadeh Garden, Kerman. Persian Gardens in the arid regions owe their existence to qanats.

TEHRAN -- Amidst Iran’s pressing water crisis, a voice from the arid heartlands of Kerman calls not for innovation, but for remembrance.

Amin Mahani, director of the Gohar-riz-e Joupar Iranian Qanat World Heritage Site, is among a growing chorus of experts urging a national return to an ancient, indigenous solution: the qanat.

Qanats—ingenious underground aqueducts that channel groundwater from mountainous mother wells to arid plains—have shaped Iran’s agricultural and cultural landscapes for over two millennia.

Unlike deep wells or industrial water systems, qanats draw water sustainably, relying on gravity rather than energy-intensive pumping. They represent not only engineering marvels but deeply rooted social and ecological systems.

“There is no water shortage,” Mahani insists. “What we have is a management crisis, and a failure to protect our civilizational heritage.”

His warning is stark: Iran has drilled nearly one million wells in recent decades—placing immense strain on subterranean aquifers—while 40,000 qanats, quieter and far more sustainable, languish under neglect.

Gohar-riz-e Joupar, with a documented history of over 600 years, is one of eleven qanats inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List in 2016 under the collective file The Persian Qanat.

Its waters still flow, nourishing 300 hectares of agricultural land and connecting six historical neighborhoods in Joupar. According to Mahani, its output fluctuates between 60 and 240 liters per second—evidence of remarkable stability in a climate increasingly prone to drought.

Yet the qanat is more than a hydraulic structure. It is a living cultural landscape. Its presence has shaped urban planning, social organization, re-

ligious rituals, and economic systems for centuries.

“Qanats are like cooperative companies,” Mahani explains. “They have stakeholders, share systems, managers, even local rituals tied to their maintenance and flow.”

A traditional council of stakeholders—farmers, technicians (muqannis), water distributors (mīrābs), and community elders—oversees cleaning, repairs, and water distribution.

Even the terminology reflects this social embeddedness: at the maqsum, or water division point, water is allocated according to familial or communal shares. Festivals like Āb-Āsh, still celebrated in Joupar during Muharram, underscore the qanat’s place in spiritual and seasonal life.

Preservation efforts continue, but challenges remain. While annual budgets from Iran’s Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts have enabled partial restoration—such as repairing the earthen walls of Joupar’s historical core and completing pedestrian pathways near the qanat’s outflow—Mahani notes that underfunding and unchecked development threaten long-term sustainability.

Urban sprawl, misguided agriculture, and demographic pressure have upended traditional land-use models. “We’ve disrupted seasonal livelihoods, destroyed 1,000-year-old orchards, and replaced self-sufficiency with dependence and overextraction,” he laments. “If we continue, we’re not only drying up water—we’re erasing our resilience.”

Today, Gohar-riz stands not only as a testament to ancient ingenuity but also as a model for future sustainability.

“Qanats are the last bastion of water resilience on the Iranian plateau,” Mahani says. “In an age of climate upheaval, they remind us that the answers may lie not ahead—but beneath our feet, quietly flowing for centuries.”

Zanjan Day Celebrates Glorious History of Suhrawardi Illumination

TEHRAN -- On Iran’s northwestern plateau, where the landscape rolls with quiet authority and memory lingers in every stone, lies Zanjan—a city ancient in spirit, luminous in legacy.

Each year, on July 30, Zanjan Day marks more than a provincial celebration. It is a collective reckoning with Iran’s deeper identity—a call to rediscover the cultural, mystical, and philosophical threads that once defined and may yet reanimate a people.

At the center of this renewed attention is a singular figure: Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi, born in 1154 CE in a village near present-day Zanjan.

Known as the Master of Illumination, Suhrawardi proposed not just a school of thought but a cosmology—a way of being in the world where light, both physical and metaphysical, orders existence.

Educated in Maragheh, later traveling through Isfahan, Anatolia, and Syria, Suhrawardi’s intellectual arc bent toward synthesis: Zoroastrian metaphysics, Neoplatonic vision, and Islamic theology folded into his magnum opus, Hikmat al-Ishraq (The Philosophy of Illumination).

But Suhrawardi was not simply a philosopher. He was a mystic who believed that knowledge must be felt, not merely reasoned. He offered a vision of truth revealed not by syllogism alone, but by a heart tuned to the subtle frequencies of the cosmos. That vision ultimately cost him his life—executed in Aleppo at the age of 38—but nearly



900 years later, it still radiates.

In 2023, Iran formally recognized Zanjan Day as a national cultural occasion, linking the modern city to its illustrious native son. This year’s observance brought with it ambitious initiatives: a planned Highway of Wisdom to connect Zanjan with Hamadan, birthplace of Avicenna.

The project, if completed, would do more than bridge geography—it would link two paradigms of Iranian philosophy: Suhrawardi’s illuminative mysticism and Avicenna’s rationalism. In an age riven by the false dichotomy between faith and reason, such a gesture feels unusually prescient.

President Masoud Pezeshkian, in a message marking the day, urged a national return to synthesis. “Reason and faith are twin wings,” he wrote.

“One cannot soar to spiritual heights without both.” Calling Suhrawardi a “harbinger of awakening,” Pezeshkian positioned his teachings not as nostalgic artifacts, but as maps toward ethical clarity in an era “deafened by materialism and emptied of meaning.”

Yet Zanjan is not solely a city of abstraction. It is equally a city of visceral devotion—most visibly during Muharram. Known as the Capital of Hussein Ardor, it transforms into a vast stage of mourning and ritual each year.

On the eighth day of the month—Tasua—hundreds of thousands join the dasteh (procession) of the Husseiniyeh-ye Azam, an event that rivals any in the Shia world. Along the route, sacrifices are made—tens of thousands of livestock offered in nazr—with the meat distributed to the poor. It is both

performance and provision, remembrance and sustenance.

Zanjan’s historical canvas stretches further still. Once a vital stop along the Silk Road, it flourished under the Seljuks and Ilkhanids. The soaring Dome of Soltaniyeh—the third-largest brick dome on Earth and a UNESCO World Heritage Site—remains its architectural heart.

Nearby, the city’s covered bazaars hum with the metallic rhythm of its famed blades, the intricate shimmer of malilehkari (silver filigree), and the soft step of charoq (traditional leather slippers).

To the south lies Katalah Khor Cave, a subterranean cathedral of stalactites. At the Saltmen Museum, visitors encounter mummified miners preserved in salt for over 2,000 years—silent emissaries of a bygone world.

In more recent history, Zanjan earned another title: The City of Big-hearted Divers, honoring its fallen underwater commandos of the Iran–Iraq War. Here, too, the metaphors run deep—sacrifice, depth, silence, resolve.

Zanjan, then, is not one thing. It is a city of contradiction and complement: of Suhrawardi’s cosmic gradations of light and the visceral pulse of mourning. A place where thought and devotion, stone and spirit, converge.

On Zanjan Day, it speaks not only to the past but to the soul of a nation still in search of meaning—and still lit by ancient fires.

How Iran’s Linguistic Tapestry Weaves Cultural Unity

TEHRAN -- At the heart of Iran’s vast cultural mosaic lies a linguistic reality both complex and deeply unifying. This truth was at the forefront of the seventh national conference on “Languages and Dialects of Iran,” held Wednesday at the Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia in Tehran.

There, Seyyed Muhammad Kazem Mousavi Bojnourdi, the center’s president, articulated a vision that is as much about identity as it is about language: Persian, alongside myriad Iranian languages and dialects, serves as a vital thread weaving together the diverse peoples of the region.

Mousavi Bojnourdi’s remarks resonate far beyond academic circles. He emphasized that Iranian languages—Kurdish, Balochi, Luri, and others—are not merely modes of communication but are profound “documents of national, religious, and cultural identity.”

Importantly, he included the Turkic and Arabic languages spoken by many Iranians as contributors to this rich linguistic ecosystem, underlining how these languages have enriched the cultural and scientific heritage of the

Iranian linguistic sphere.

The Persian language itself stands out, as Mousavi Bojnourdi noted, not only as Iran’s official tongue but as a historic “element of unity.” Its vast literary and scholarly treasury, spanning centuries, has bound Iranians together through shared stories, poetry, and cultural memory. It is a language that transcends provincial and ethnic divides, one that no force has managed to sunder.

The conference also welcomed insights from scholars such as Jalaleh Amouzegar, who compared discovering dialects to unearthing archaeological sites—precious relics at risk of being lost.

She underscored the necessity of respecting and preserving these dialects as living parts of Iran’s heritage.

Likewise, linguist Ali-Ashraf Sadeghi reminded attendees that languages inevitably borrow and evolve. Arabic loanwords in Persian, he argued, are not a burden but a testament to centuries of cultural symbiosis. Indeed, the intellectual vigor of Persian owes much to such exchanges.

The discussions traced Iranian languages back millennia, touching on



the roots of Old Persian, Median, and Parthian, and their spread through the great empires of the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sasanians.

Mahmoud Jafari Dehaqi, the scientific secretary of the conference, highlighted that many Iranian languages and dialects thrive beyond Iran’s modern borders—in places ranging from the Caucasus to Central and South Asia. These tongues carry Iranian culture and worldview far beyond Tehran’s political map, cementing a

shared cultural heritage across nations.

The conference’s scholarly presentations further illustrated the richness and diversity of Iran’s linguistic landscape, covering topics from dialectology to etymology, and from sociolinguistics to historical linguistics. It was a vivid reminder that Iran’s languages and dialects, rather than dividing, serve as living bridges—connecting peoples, histories, and cultures within Iran and across the wider Persianate world.

New Book Traces Guitar’s Origins Back to Iran



TEHRAN -- In a provocative new work, *Guitar, Originally an Iranian Instrument*, the musician and scholar Pedram Amini Abyaneh challenges the long-held Western-centric narrative of the guitar’s origins.

With a scholarly rigor reminiscent of a historian uncovering a lost chapter, Amini situates the guitar not in medieval Europe or the Spanish Renaissance, but rather deep within the cradle of ancient Iranian civilization.

The book is less a casual treatise and more an excavation — a meticu-

lous, document-supported endeavor to reclaim a cultural lineage often overshadowed by Eurocentric accounts.

Contrary to popular belief, Amini argues, the guitar’s ancestry traces back to the East, with the oud, a pear-shaped stringed instrument historically associated with Persian and Arabic music, emerging as a direct progenitor.

What makes *Guitar, Originally an Iranian Instrument* especially compelling is its multidisciplinary approach. The narrative moves fluidly

through musicology, history, and cultural studies, tracing the guitar’s evolution not as a single linear progression but as a rich, tangled tapestry of cross-cultural exchanges.

Amini analyzes the structural elements of the six-string guitar, juxtaposing it with the oud’s tuning and range, thereby uncovering striking parallels that invite a reconsideration of the guitar’s heritage.

This reexamination resonates in a contemporary moment keenly aware of the dynamics of cultural appropriation and the politics of identity. By foregrounding Iran’s contribution to the guitar’s development, Amini amplifies the voices and histories often marginalized in global music histories.

The book’s chapters unfold with a rhythmic precision: from the geographical and historical context of ancient Iran as a musical hub, to detailed comparative studies of stringed instruments across Eurasia, to reflections on the guitar’s place in modern popular culture. Amini’s prose is precise, often lyrical, and suffused with an evident reverence for the instrument’s rich past.

Picture of the Day



Silk weaving, an ancient and valuable handicraft, remains a thriving industry in the Jargalan region of North Khorasan Province, with a rich history and continued cultural significance.

Photo by IRNA