

Obituary: Dr. Shahnaz R. Nadjmabadi

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Dr. Shahnaz R. Nadjmabadi

The Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Institute for Asian and Oriental Studies mourns the loss of Dr. Shahnaz R. Nadjmabadi, a scholar whose life's work was devoted to a single, passionate question: How do people live and connect across borders?

Shahnaz Nadjmabadi studied Ethnology, Sociology and Psychology at the Universities of Freiburg, Vienna and Heidelberg, and in 1974 completed her doctorate at the University of Heidelberg with a dissertation on the Širavand of Western Lorestan – an ethnographic study that already foreshadowed her central theme: the entanglement of kinship, space and social order. After an initial position at the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Zurich, a particularly formative chapter of her life began: from 1977 to 1983 she worked as a Project Officer at UNESCO in Paris, where she coordinated and evaluated regional projects on spatial and settlement planning in Africa and Asia as part of the Man and Biosphere programme.

Those years left lasting traces – in her sensitivity to applied and development-related questions, and in her conviction that social and cultural anthropology must be of consequence in the world. Both shaped her teaching and research in everything that followed.

From 1984 she was a member of the research group *Sciences Sociales du Monde Iranien Contemporain* at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, and from 1987 a research associate at the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg. From 1990 to 1992 she taught at the University of Maryland in Heidelberg, and from 1995 to 1999 she returned as a research associate to the University of Heidelberg. There followed years of intensive third-party funded research: at the University of Bamberg, at Goethe University Frankfurt, in Aix-Marseille, and in consultancy roles for UNESCO and UNDP. From autumn 2009 she was an academic staff member at the Institute for Asian and Oriental Studies at the University of Tübingen, which together with the University of Frankfurt became her final academic home.

At the heart of her scholarly work lay the world of the Iranian coastal population and their intricate connections with the Arab societies of the Persian Gulf – a region long overlooked in international research. In works such as *The Arab Presence on the Iranian Coast of the Persian Gulf* (2009) and *Cross-Border Networks: Labour Migration from Iran to the Arab Countries of the Persian Gulf* (2010), she made foundational contributions that shed new light on the intertwined lives of Iranian and Arab societies. With the edited volume *Conceptualizing Iranian Anthropology: Past and Present Perspectives* (Berghahn Books, 2009) she created a landmark work in social and cultural anthropology. For this book she was not only editor but also the driving force behind and host of the first international conference on anthropological perspectives on Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 – a milestone for the discipline. Her final contribution, *The Sea Belongs to God, the Land Belongs to Us* (2021), can be read as the motto of her entire scholarly life: the world of borderlands, of mobility, of people navigating between seas and cultures.

Shahnaz Nadjmabadi was not only a researcher but a networker and bridge-builder in the finest sense of the word. She contributed to shaping the Tübingen Collaborative Research Centre *RessourcenKulturen* (SFB 1070, 2013–2025) and opened doors for countless students and researchers from Heidelberg, Frankfurt and Tübingen to come to know Iran and its society in all its richness and complexity. She treasured the freedom that third-party funding affords researchers in Germany, and she knew how to make the most of that freedom – for her discipline, for her colleagues, for her students. In recognition of her decades of outstanding work as a scholar and mediator across national and disciplinary boundaries, she was honoured last year with a dedicated volume: *Resources, Networks and Transformations in Southeastern Iran. Anthropological and Archaeological Perspectives* – a collection that brought together Iran researchers from many different disciplines and countries, most of whom shared a long and deep friendship with Shahnaz Nadjmabadi.

In Heidelberg she was present not only in academic circles but in the life of the city itself: a familiar and beloved figure at intellectual gatherings and cultural events. Those who had the privilege of thinking and working alongside her encountered a woman of extraordinary intellectual curiosity, generosity and warmth. She gave courage, asked questions that stayed with you long after – and never left behind anyone who needed her support.

Dr. Shahnaz R. Nadjmabadi leaves a profound absence in social and cultural anthropology – and in the hearts of all who knew her. Our deepest sympathies go to her family.

She will be missed.

جای خالی او همیشه باقی‌ست

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