Survivals and Surviving: Belonging to Zar in Cairo

by

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(Hagar, and Haguer)

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ABSTRACT

HAGER EL HADIDI: Survivals and Surviving: Belonging to Zar in Cairo
(Under the direction of Robert E. Daniels)

This study is about zar spirit possession as practiced in Cairo, mostly by Muslim women. The research is based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork. The word zar has two meanings. It refers to a number of spirits which have the capacity to afflict humans with physical and psychological ailments or existential harm which are seen as symptoms of possession. The word also refers to a set of rituals and healing practices that reconciles the spirits with their human hosts and reverses the effect of possession from affliction to well-being. The study focuses on the socialization and localization of space and time in the zar ritual complex through a discussion of a sample from the extensive and elaborate ritual practices and on zar experience as images of passiones in dreams, cravings, trance and other ritual events (Kramer 1993).

Zar spirits and rituals incorporate a person experiencing a crisis into a body of people who view themselves as a guild corporation. The core of zar initiation rituals is a sacrificial rite, practiced throughout the life cycle of the zar members thus grounding them in the landscape of Cairo while producing locallity and belonging (Appadurai 1996). Public forms of zar devotion may also include trance and other forms of dancing and the sharing of the sacrificial meal.
Zar is a hybrid transnational phenomenon that came to Egypt from different places in Africa through the slave trade in the nineteenth century. Its most interesting feature is its dynamism in the face of change and its ability to adapt to different social and economic conditions. Zar is an open-ended system that continuously absorbs new symbolic and material elements into its practices. The analysis of Zar should not be confined to monolithic interpretations because it is open to a variety of experiences and interpretations. My study demonstrates that Zar is not only a guild corporation, a profession, a set of rituals that localizes people in time and space, a way of knowing the world, a moral orientation, but also Zar may also be interpreted as a source of community, acts of transfer (Connerton 1989), religion, history, performance and entertainment.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I  REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK ON ZAR IN EGYPT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Research History</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Description of Chapters</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II REVIEW OF LITERATURE: ZAR AND SPIRIT POSSESSION</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Writings about Zar in Egypt and Sudan</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Zar in Egypt</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Theories of Spirit Possession</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conclusion</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III FROM ABYSSINIA TO CAIRO: THE ZAR RITUAL COMPLEX</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction: Origin and Etymology</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Egyptian Zar as a Transnational Phenomenon</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Egyptian Conceptions of Zar</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Zar and Islam ................................................................. 51
5. Spirit Afflictions and their Symptoms .............................. 53
6. Gender, Class and Zar Participation .................................. 55
7. Zar Professionals: Leaders and Musicians .......................... 57
8. The Zar Rituals Placation Process ..................................... 59
9. Zar Music and Dance .................................................... 69
10. Zar Paraphernalia ......................................................... 72
11. Conclusion .................................................................. 76

IV THE ZAR TRADE: BELONGING TO TAYFET AL-ZAR ............ 77
1. Introduction .................................................................. 77
2. Historiographical Studies of Women in Cairo ..................... 80
3. Zar as Guild Corporation ................................................. 82
4. Historical Roots of Zar and Guild Incorporation Rituals ...... 88
5. The Stories of Professional Zar Diviners ............................ 93
6. The Moral of the Stories .................................................. 106
7. Conclusion ................................................................ 108

V LOCALIZATION OF BODIES IN TIME: LIFE CYCLE AND OTHER CRISES ................................................................. 113
1. Introduction ................................................................ 113
2. The Crises of Teenage Years ............................................. 114
3. Pregnancy and Birthing ................................................... 125
4. Menopause: The Grand Lady .......................................... 128
5. The Disintegrated Plastic Flowers ..................................... 135
VI LOCALIZATION OF BODIES IN SPACE: A RITUAL SAMPLER .......... 143

1. The Offering of Incense .................................................. 143
2. The Offering of Blood: The Sacrificial Rite ............................ 148
3. The Grand Lady’s Procession Parade ................................... 152
4. The Mayanga: the Cemetery of the Spirits .............................. 159
5. Conclusion ........................................................................... 160

VII SAINTS AND SPIRITS: TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONS .......... 162

1. Introduction ...................................................................... 162
2. Zar Songs as ‘Acts of Transfer’ ......................................... 165
3. The Historical Context of the Abul Gheit Song ...................... 168
4. Cultural Memories .............................................................. 169
5. The Golden Pair .................................................................. 175
6. The Military Spirit Pantheon .............................................. 183
7. Zar Music Bands and their Styles of Singing ......................... 184
8. The Hybridization and Transformation of Musical Styles .......... 187
9. The History of the Song: Oh Girls of the Engineering School .... 189
10. Conclusion ....................................................................... 196

APPENDIX I: List of DVD Clips .................................................. 200

BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................................. 201
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Map of Egypt</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My first pair of zar bracelets</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Head template amulet from my childhood</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. An old heart amulet from Lower Egypt</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A new heart amulet used in Cairo and Upper Egypt</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Upper Egyptian Zar Band</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Rayessa Karima and Om Hassan</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Sangak Ouf the Tambura leader</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Tambura dancer enticing devotees to dance</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Ibrahim the Tambura dancer</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Rayess Othman, the Gheitaniya leader and myself</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The Ghetaniya musicians leading a zar devotee into trance</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Om Hassan hosting the spirit Yawra Bey</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Yawra in full trance-possession</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Yawra's pear-shaped amulet</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Yawra's zar disc amulet</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Tambura or Sudani Band</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Old hawanim il-habash Amulet from Cairo</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK ON ZAR IN EGYPT

1. Introduction

The following monograph is a study of zar spirit possession in Egypt. Zar is a ritual practiced in societies around the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The word zar refers to a number of spirits which have the ability to possess humans and to afflict them with troubles and ailments. Zar also refers to a set of rituals practiced throughout the life cycle of an individual to pacify those spirits and to reverse the effects of possession from affliction to wellbeing. Zar spirits and rituals incorporate a person experiencing a crisis into a body of people who have gone through similar experiences and have the accumulated knowledge to help this person to overcome his or her problems.

The core of zar initiation rituals is a sacrificial rite which incorporates a person into a group of zar participants under the oversight of a professional zar leader. Public forms of zar ritual celebration include dance songs played by professional musicians and lasting for hours. The intensity and rhythmic complexity of zar music is irresistible to participants and spirits alike; it attracts the spirits as it lures the participants into dancing. It is during the zar dance that the identity of a spirit may merge gradually with that of the dancers often culminating in trance. Zar is also an intuitive way of knowing and being in the world. Its essence is a flexible
structure that allows a participant a great deal of improvisation and a moral
orientation that gradually guides individuals throughout their life cycle. Participants
are comfortable with zar because it is infinitely malleable: it is always adapted to
their circumstances. Zar songs and rituals are improvised to fit their needs.
However, zar people say that its power works only if one is “sincere,” “pure,” and
“generous” to zar spirits and people.

People seek out zar initiation when in crisis for a wide range of motivations
and a variety and a multitude of reasons; some are explicit and some are
idiosyncratic. First initiation often takes place when a woman is still in her teens. She
then becomes part of a network of people who share zar experiences, and who
orient each other throughout their lives. Zar initiation draws a troubled person into a
world where she or he can find solace and resolution. Most importantly, she or he
becomes part of a close knit community. This atmosphere offers the seeker advice,
acceptance, companionship, and an opportunity to be generous and charitable,
while at the same time enjoying zar music, dance, and dining together.

Zar songs play an important role in reconciling the spirits with their human
hosts. Songs are instruments of healing because of their potential to communicate
with and mobilize the power of different groups of supernatural beings: God, the
prophets, the saints and the zar spirits. The ritual singing of zar calls these
supernatural entities into action to help the devotees. The zar devotees usually
respond to songs with a special kind of dancing, taqir, leading them to trance.

This monograph is about how different people in Metropolitan Cairo
experience zar; it is based on years of extensive ethnographic fieldwork in different
parts of Egypt and personal experience. The experience and understanding that I communicate in the present monograph is not only that of an ethnographer but also as a zar cult member in Cairo. It treats some aspects of Egyptian zar spirit possession that have rarely been addressed in the literature: zar rites and rituals as well as songs and music within zar communities.

My main focus is on the socialization and localization of space and time in the zar ritual complex through elaborate and deliberate practices of performance, representation, action, and circulation of symbolic and material capital. Following Arjun Appadurai (1996), I show how zar could be perceived as one of the technologies of sociability and localization available to actors in the zar scene of Cairo. Zar connectivity builds community within the old quarters of Cairo. Key participants in zar include cult leaders, professional zar musicians, and devotees.

My research shows how participation in zar forges social and economic relationships which transcend conventional class and gender relations. These relationships in turn inscribe ‘locality’ on participants and produce community. Participation in zar rituals creates a communal network of friendship and relationship at the same time that it grounds devotees in the landscape of Cairo, with its narrow alleys, public baths, local saint shrines, cemeteries and the Nile.

I am also interested in zar songs, their production, and their meanings from various perspectives. I conclude my analysis of zar by examining the hybridization and consumption of zar songs and their relevance to social change. I interpret some of the songs as a genre of oral history of African slaves and marginalized Sufis who contributed to zar in previous times. Following Paul Connerton (1989), I view those
songs as a kind of embodied history, as understood in the context of the social formation of nineteenth century Egypt.

2. Research History

My First Encounter with Zar

I was born and raised in Cairo in a middle class professional home, which was exceptionally secular by Egyptian standards.¹ Family stories about my great aunt include sumptuous zar parties, of which my mother only recalls the hubbub, the silverware and the caterers. These stories only came out when I began to show anthropological interest in zar. Before I started working on zar, most of my acquaintances in Cairo knew of zar only from films and television. The Egyptian mass media portrays zar mostly as "superstition," while newspapers often speak of zar as heresy and the work of charlatans.

The first time I encountered a live zar ceremony was in 1978. At the time, as an undergraduate student in anthropology, I derived great pleasure in pursuing ethnographic adventures and observations of cultural phenomena. One day as I was driving around with a Belgian friend, who was visiting Cairo, we came near the city cemeteries, right where the Eastern side of the Nile valley disappears into the limestone foot of the Moqatam hills. Our attention was drawn by some strange drumming. When we identified the source of the sound, we saw an unusual gathering of people. We parked quickly and walked towards the crowd. Huge tents had been

¹ An earlier version that discusses my first encounter with zar is published in my master's thesis (El Hadidi 1997).
erected near a shrine. They were surrounded by a large number of local women
dressed in traditional black gowns.²

We were told that the shrine belonged to a local saint named Sidi Abul Saoud,
and that this gathering of people was a hadret zar which was held each Tuesday at the
shrine. We came closer and decided to join the action taking place in one of the tents.
We paid an entrance fee of LE .25 (then US$ .30).³

Inside the tent there was a dance floor and a band composed of six male
musicians. As we came closer we realized that one of them was the dancer. He had
exceptionally long hair for an Egyptian man, a few inches beyond his shoulders. There
was also a lead singer and a chorus. The band included one wind instrument and
many types of drums. All the performers were dressed in white galabiyas, the
traditional male ceremonial clothing.⁴

The drumming was very pronounced. Women made up most of the audience.
They sat cross legged around the dance floor, with their backs to the tent walls,
completing a circle with the band. The band was directed by a woman. She did not
play music, sing or dance; I realized later that she was the sheikha (the officiating
leader). Instead, she oversaw the performance and the well-being of the people in the
tent: her clients. Whenever she spotted a subtle response to the rhythm of the music

²In Egypt, the form of clothing worn reveals class and ethnic identities. In both rural and
urban areas, most traditional married women’s outer garments are black or dark in color. In general,
with high school education and a job, an Egyptian woman or girl may avoid the traditional black outer
garment in favor of more colorful clothing of a different style, and may work. In Cairo, the black outer
garment marks the baladi, or traditional, as opposed to the educated class (See also Rugh 1986 on
Egyptian dress modes).

³The exchange rate from US$ to Egyptian Pounds (LE) has steadily increased since 1978. In
1978, one US$ was worth LE .65, whereas today this rate is almost one US$ to LE 3.40.

⁴A galabeya is a long robe that resembles a Western shirt, reaching to the ankles. By the
1990s, the white galabeya was the most common male attire, due to the influence of the Arab oil
states.
by a member of the audience, she would make sure that the dancer would lure that person onto the dance floor. When an entranced woman passed out and fell on the dance floor, the sheikha would put pressure on her forehead, and then sprinkle her with rose water.

We took our places among the audience. We watched the trancers and talked with the women around us. To our surprise, the beating of drums soon began to affect us, and we felt compelled to dance. Our upper bodies were swinging with the music. The mistress signaled to the musicians to accelerate the drumming. Then she looked at the dancer, who immediately stepped toward us and invited me to the dance floor. We had noticed earlier that as each woman went to the dance floor, she would give some money to the band; these monetary contributions were dropped into a cloth bag to hold for the musicians. I gave the dancer LE .25; he swiftly ritually circled the money around my head, kissed it and put in the same cloth bag.

The same thing happened to my friend. Each of us spontaneously danced a dance that was very different than that of the other women. With the acceleration of the drumming, we were both induced into trance. I lost control of myself. It was a feeling similar to what I felt as a child at the climax of swinging, almost like an orgasm.\textsuperscript{5} We were no longer aware of what we were doing.

Still etched in my memory is a woman in her late thirties who would not join the dance floor like the rest of us. I identified her as a baladi woman because of her black outer garment. She was wearing a lot of gold jewelry. Her tears flowed continuously every time a particular song was played. Her sobbing increased when the singer was saying fire (\textit{in-nar}), which was a metaphor for describing inner pain. When her tears

\textsuperscript{5}El Eleimi also compares zar trance to sexual intercourse (1993:51).
dried, we chatted a bit. After our trance she looked at us and said: "We go to zar and you go to disco" (discotheque).

The woman was making a cultural parallel that is very commonly used: when zar devotees explain what is going on in zar to outsiders. I still find the relativizing idiom comparing zar to disco quite interesting because it is motivated by finding the common grounds between different experiences in separate settings: trance dance in zar and discotheque dancing.

After all, attendants in both spaces dance with intensity and let off some steam. In both cases, it is an embodied performance, a practice and a bodily habit in which music plays an important role. In fact, the disco metaphor was also used in two other scholarly accounts on Egyptian zar. Eisler reports in the voice of one of her informants that some middle class women go to zar gatherings to relax, to enjoy themselves and to listen to music an experience, according to her informants, very similar to "going to a disco" (1985:25). El-Shamy states that in some sense the zar ritual "resembles Western rock festival cults or night clubs with psychedelic music and dance" (1980:176).

At the time of this first encounter with a zar ceremony, twenty years ago, the event was just another cultural phenomenon of Cairo. Cairo is a complex social space with one thousand years of history that is sensuously experienced in its skyline and its noise level. Today minarets, domes of mosques, shrines like that of Sidi Abul Saoud, foreign construction cranes for skyscrapers and satellite dishes in every conceivable space stand out in the panorama viewed by any observer. People are drawn to Cairo from all over Egypt seeking work, leisure, health care and religious expression. Along
with the massive permanent population, an influx of people swells the city's daytime population to over twenty million people.

Quite often activities for leisure, work, religion or healing are one and the same, just like the zar gatherings described above. It was not until the fall of 1988, ten years later, that I fully realized that this zar event by the shrine of Sidi Abul Saoud would become important in my life and would constitute the first of a series of encounters with zar. In the intervening years, I had never thought about zar. I had completed a B.A. in social anthropology and carried out fieldwork in a number of different communities in Egypt. Now in Minia in Upper Egypt, in the gold and silver market of the city, I came across fadat il me'afrateen (silver of the possessed). These were particular amulets and jewelry used in the zar ceremony.

From Collector to Ethnographer

I remember exactly when the zar bug bit me. It was a warm late afternoon in November 1988 and I was in El Minya, in Upper Egypt. I had finished my work for the day and wanted to use my free time to buy some traditional Upper Egyptian silver jewelry.
So I went to browse in the gold market, which occupies only one street in the center of town.

There were around twelve to fourteen small shops displaying gold jewelry in their glass windows, with many customers, mostly groups of women, shopping and browsing. For a while I watched their interaction from the street, until I noticed that there was one particular shop that attracted groups of women wearing older styles of clothing. I also noticed that its window shop had more jewelry in old traditional designs than the other shops in the market.

I asked the merchant to show me old silver jewelry. He showed me the only thing then available; a pair of bracelets with small bells (shown below). I bought the bracelets without hesitation and I wear them to this day. The goldsmith referred to the pair of bracelets as *faddet il-me’affrateen* (silver of the possessed).

![Illustration 2. My first pair of zar bracelets](image)
Zar Amulets

The silver of the possessed were particular amulets and jewelry used in zar ceremony. Most of this amuletic jewelry had small bells in odd numbers. I suddenly remembered that I had seen them many times in window shops in Cairo but had never associated them with zar or possession. I even remembered that as a child I used to play with a pair of silver earring that belonged to my mother. Neither of us knew that they were zar amulets.

Illustration 3. Head template amulet from my childhood

The discovery of zar amulets sparked my interest. I began to follow the zar trail looking for fadat il-me’affrateen in the silver markets of Cairo and other
provincial cities in Egypt. In the process, I found myself developing an ethnography of zar. Beginning during the first half of 1989, I spent most of my free time in the silver markets of Sohag and Akhmim in Upper Egypt and Cairo until I left for the United States in June 1994.

My early interest in zar was focused on its amuletic silver jewelry. Over a period of five years, I collected more than 100 different specimens, mostly from my goldsmith and silversmith friends in Upper Egypt. These were hand picked from the many more I have seen in different markets all over Egypt. In my mind I was building a collection of zar amulets for a future ethnography focused on the amulets. To my silversmith friends, particularly ‘am Nassif, I was writing a large book on zar. Whenever any of my friends introduced me to others in the silver market, he would proudly say: “She is writing a book on zar that big”—stretching his index and his thumb as far apart as possible.

In this early period of fieldwork, I was seeking the knowledge of the craftsmen who made or sold the amulets, as well as those who were zar devotees. The latter used fadat il-me’affrateen in ritual and as a sign of devotion to zar in everyday life. I was hoping to be able to decipher the vocabulary of magical motifs inscribed in the amulets by various techniques, but instead I learned about the market.

I had extensive discussions with twelve craftsmen and retailers from Sohag and Akhmim in Upper Egypt and a few from Cairo. Three of the male smiths in Sohag became my good friends and where very interested to help me know more about zar. Whenever I had a question, they asked around. But nobody seemed to know anything about the symbols in the amulets. The craftsmen were reproducing
what their fathers passed on to them without knowing what these symbols mean. The possessed and the cult leaders representing them chose their own zar amulets, mostly by going into trance in the silver or goldsmith store, and/or by identifying amulets that they had seen in visions and dreams.

The craftsmen saw the amulets in terms of their functions, place of origin, percentage of silver, and the amount of craftsmanship involved in producing them. The scope of their knowledge may be limited by their gender or their religious affiliation; most of the silversmiths and retailers are Coptic Christian men, and zar is almost entirely practiced by Muslims, and more often among Muslim women. But most important, the silversmiths remain outsiders to the zar cult despite their association with devotees and leaders who buy amulets from them. They often get invited to zar initiation ceremonies and can generally describe the overall ceremony. Only the most knowledgeable retailer was from Cairo—a Moslem woman who had herself been a zar devotee.

I could not learn from the silversmiths the meanings of the motifs on the amulets. Instead I was introduced to the many levels of the zar amulet market, a subject they loved to talk and reflect about. The focus of my ethnography then shifted for me, from the amulets themselves to their systems of circulation.

At least one fourth of the silver jewelry pieces bought and sold in the provincial capitals of Upper Egypt were locally produced zar amulets. In Sohag Governorate market alone, in the sixties and seventies, fadat il-me’affrateen constituted two-thirds of the production and sale of silver jewelry. Most fadat il-me’affrateen was produced by craftsmen within the same or neighboring
governorates. The magnitude of the market indicated the extent and the complexity of zar devotion itself.

With this realization, I tried to attend a zar congregation in Sohag Governorate. I was still motivated by a passionate desire to know about the meaning of the motifs on my collection of amulets. Unfortunately, despite the mediation of my silversmith friends, I was denied entry twice in the Akhmim zar congregation.

Banat el-Safi (daughters of el-Safi), are the two gypsy sisters, who jointly lead the zar cult of the city. They were not comfortable with journalists. The sisters, having no concept of anthropology, thought that I could only be a journalist who was going to besmirch their names in the newspapers. Disappointed, I went back to Cairo where I lived and decided to look for a local cult.

Doing the Ethnography of Zar in Cairo

*Hadrat Sidi Abul Saoud*

In October 1993, I was still hoping that I could learn about the amulets from the devotees. I thought I just had to find a local cult in Cairo and have a few interviews about the amulets. So I went to the Abul Saoud neighborhood, where I had my first encounter to find the zar tents that I remembered from my youth when we passed by Salah Salem road on Tuesdays.

However, there were no tents around the shrine of Abul Saoud. I asked around and was told that the government had built a model park for children in the place where the tents had once been pitched. People directed me to the three cult leaders (two women and one man). They were living down the road and were
hosting *hadras* (weekly zar gatherings) in their respective homes. I chose the most conveniently located *hadra*, which was run by a woman called El-Gariya Son'o.

From then on, I attended the *zar* almost every Tuesday for the *hadra* with El-Gariya for a period of seven months, until I left Egypt in June 1994. I began doing participant observation in the weekly gathering (*hadra*) in the neighborhood of Sidi Abul Saoud. Abul Saoud El Garḥi is the saint of the afflicted or wounded (*magāriḥ*). And I had my first initiation into *zar* following anthropological traditions. Since during the time I frequented the *hadra* at Abul Saoud, I did not have the opportunity to be invited to an actual *zar* initiation ceremony so I had to stage my own initiation to get a sense of what was going on. Consequently, I began very slowly to develop an understanding of the ritual and its complexity. At the same time, the more I participated in weekly *zar* gatherings, the more my interest shifted away from the amulets and toward the actual rituals and congregation. My Upper Egyptian collection of amulets was very different than those used in Cairo.

In Cairo, most of the *zar* amulets were made of gold. The silver ones were not as varied as those of Upper Egypt. I found no participants or cult leaders who knew much about the Upper Egyptian *zar* amulets. I collected a few possession narratives and observed the interaction among devotees and between the devotees and the musicians in the *hadra*. I continued to join this Tuesday weekly gathering on short visits to Cairo in the summers of 1995, 1996 and 1998. El-Gariya Son'o died in 2004. I was told that her *hadra* had not continued; despite the fact that two of her daughters were very much engaged in *zar*, and the eldest was helping her manage the *hadra*. 

14
Finding Sheikha Anhar

In June 1996, after one year of graduate school in the United States, I stumbled across somebody who was willing to take me to Anhar, whom I had wanted to meet for a long time. I had been hearing about her accomplishment as a zar singer from other devotees in Abul Saoud. One of my zar friends played Anhar's commercial zar tapes for me when I visited her in her home. Other devotees spoke very highly of Anhar; she was the most famous and prestigious cult mistress and zar singer in Egypt.

I was finally taken to Anhar's hadra (weekly zar gathering) in the Bab el-Wazir neighborhood in El Darb El Ahmar district in the old medieval part of the city, which I could never have found on my own. El Darb El Ahmar area is one of the neighborhoods that is called the medina by its inhabitants. Anhar's hadra was near the shrine of Fatma El Nabawiya, which was the nurturing saint of orphans--and congregated on Mondays, Saint Fatma's visitation day.

Anhar was the first cult mistress I encountered in Cairo who also sang zar songs. The three cult leaders of Abul Saoud were employing other singers for their zar services. Their singing always seemed to be submerged by the heavy drumming of many drums. Anhar's well-articulated singing and sense of hospitality enchanted me, and I joined her cult. I underwent my second initiation mostly because I wanted her to teach me about zar. I wanted to be part of her group. After my second initiation, I soon became a regular participant in the congregation. For the first time, I
was doing more than participant observation: I was really practicing zar. I made friendships and shared interest in practicing zar with others in the congregation.

During these three months of fieldwork in Egypt, I also visited two other zar congregations and listened to singer/leaders in Sohag in Upper Egypt and in the village of Abul Gheit in Qalyubiya, at forty minutes commuting distance north from Cairo, on a regular basis. In Cairo I was also invited for the first time to two initiation ceremonies. It was during this period that I developed a passion for this new world that Anhar had revealed to me: the world of zar songs and music. Without any effort on my part, I found myself memorizing songs. I tape recorded more than a hundred zar liturgies and songs in different styles from different congregations.

I was intuitively convinced that a focus on the songs was essential to understanding the ritual complex on its own terms. After all, songs are played extensively in the weekly gatherings and in the initiation ceremonies. Each song entices a particular possessing spirit to manifest itself in the body of the dancing participant, which is crucial to the healing process. Each initiated devotee knows exactly which zars or saint spirits possess her. Devotees request the type of music and specific rhythm they need for each zar and spirit to manifest itself in the course of dancing. For responding to the devotees' requests the musicians are rewarded handsomely. These songs are mostly praise songs to the prophet Muhammad, to zars and to spirits of Muslim and Christian saints (in Egypt, saint veneration is not based on sectarian divisions).

There are different styles of singing and music, as well as different genres of song. Sometimes the same song is set to different rhythms within the same style of
music. Some of the songs are very simple and consist only of a few rhymes with call and response. Songs in praise of Muslim saints are very elaborate, and always include a great number of improvised rhymes, which increase according to the mastery of the singer and the mood of the gathering. Unlike the *djinn* praise songs, this genre consists not only of call and response, but also includes a narrative plot, sampling from within the genre, and borrowing from popular religious songs. One never hears a song of this genre sung in the same way twice, even from the same singer. Some other songs and rituals are not even sung in Arabic, and no devotee understands the words.⁶

In the summers of 1997 and 1998, I expanded my visits to other *hadras* and other leaders, while remaining actively engaged with Anhar’s congregation.⁷ I was very interested in the *zar* musicians as a community. I visited six Friday *hadras* in Abul Gheit, north of Cairo, attended all three Tuesday *hadras* in Abul Saoud several times, and went to two newly opened *hadras* in Cairo, in the neighborhoods of Rod El Farag north of Bulac and El Leithi in the city of the dead. I also attended two *hadras* in Fayoum Governorate and in the City of Alexandria. I interviewed the director of a state folklore dance and music troupe who employed a large number of the male *zar* musicians and dancers. I went back to the field in the summers of 2000, 2002 and 2005.

By the end of my last fieldwork period in 2005, I knew most of the *zar* musicians and they knew me as one of Anhar’s daughters (a member of her cult). I

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⁶ For instance, some songs are sung in a language called *Rotana*, which refers to any language spoken by black or African (*Barabra*) peoples. When I asked a singer who was of *Sudani* slave descent if she understood the meaning of the words she was singing, she didn’t answer.

⁷ Anhar died after a short illness in August 1998, while I was in Cairo.
had many interviews with musicians and also had many informal conversations with
groups of musicians about the history and styles of music. My strong associations
within the zar community centered on Anhar and her daughter Karima helped me get
invited by the musicians to zar neighborhood ceremonies in the old parts of Cairo, to
river ceremonies (zar il-bahr) and to the cemetery (qarafa or zar ig-gabal) rituals. I
recorded many songs and rituals, and talked with many women and men about their
lives and experiences.

In the neighborhoods, I saw how zar public initiatory celebrations attracted all
the devotees from within the neighborhood and solidified relationships among them.
Cash gifts (nuqut, plural of nuqta), following the same principles as those exchanged
at weddings and birth celebrations, were given to the initiand during the two or three
days of the zar celebration. These cash gifts were part of a network of reciprocation
that extended over the initiands' zar careers. I also learned that, until recently, joyful
female life cycle rituals such as birthing, marriage and pilgrimage (haj) were often
celebrated by holding a zar night (leila). These are zar performances of songs for
entertainment not to placate and assuage the spirits. Today, zar as entertainment is
only locally practiced in the Batniya neighborhood.

I began to see zar not only as a healing system, but also as a culturally
informed, institutionalized way to produce communities grounded in the landscape of
Cairo and associated with its local saints such Sidi Abul Saoud and Sitina Fatma El
Nabawiya. I wanted to learn how zar informed and produced 'localities' within a
particular 'neighborhood' (Appadurai 1996), in addition to my earlier interest on
songs and rituals.
After Anhar's death, I had had two more zar initiation officiated by Karima. These last two initiations were very different experientially from those I commissioned with the purpose of knowing more about zar anthropologically. When I stopped observing and recording zar I started experiencing zar techniques (Mauss 1934) beyond rationality. While rationally I cannot acknowledge the supernatural as such and its grip on our lives, the experience of zar rites and rituals touched me from within. I am not acknowledging the existence of zar spirits but I cannot ignore the strong effect some elements of zar rituals had on me. Blood, sacrifice, amuletic jewelry, anointment, songs, prayer, incense, trance and music are all very powerful experiential ritual tools that move and touch people regardless of belief in the supernatural.

3. Methodological Strategies: Storytelling and Collage

The following section introduces the writing strategies I adopt in parts of my monograph: storytelling and ethnographic collage. I consider both strategies not only as styles of writing but also as epistemologies, as a way of knowing the world. My intention is to maintain positionality and preserve a sense of multivocality by weaving spirit possession narratives in translation by active zar members alongside my own interpretation of these stories as well as my understanding of zar rituals and its social worlds.

The Art of Telling Stories

My discussion of the methodological strategies I adopt in my study of zar
begins by invoking the memory of a 1992 paradigmatic conversation with my fieldwork partner of more than ten years Hussein Tamaa. Both of us were facing a bit of an identity crisis. We were both working as applied anthropologists. We both had a great deal of passion towards our work and felt that being anthropologists was part of our respective identities. But the problem Hussein and I were having had to do with this shared identity as anthropologists and the fact that being an anthropologist is not a recognizable social category in Egypt. We were asking ourselves and each other if it were at all possible to claim anthropology as part of our own identity when it was not identifiable by the communities where we live and do fieldwork.

We discussed ethnography as a way of life, and the ways in which anthropology also exists outside of academia without even being labeled anthropology. We had been pondering the anthropological project and the ways in which it related to people such as ourselves, in other words, to individuals who belonged to our respective communities; we also wondered about the relationship between anthropology and those among whom we did our ethnographic work. We knew we were ‘arabs (of Bedouin stock)\(^8\) and we liked to think of ourselves as organic intellectuals (Gramsci1971); consequently, we were concerned about matters relating to our intellectual genealogy and kinship as well as with matters regarding our marginality with respect to western anthropological traditions.

As far as we were concerned, the Egyptian academic anthropological variant did not stand outside of the norms of western anthropological studies. In Egypt, there are only two small anthropology departments; neither one offers a doctoral

\(^8\) arab is an ethnic category within Egypt.
program. The first, founded by Evans-Pritchard, is at the University of Alexandria. I was enrolled at the second one, which was at the American University in Cairo.

Anthropology, unlike sociology and psychology, is an almost unknown discipline in Egypt. In most cases, when you tell someone in Egypt that you work as an anthropologist—which in Arabic translates as a researcher in the science of man (bahitha fi ‘ilm il-insan)—your interlocutor will immediately try to correct you: “You mean psychology!”

Still, my friend and I, despite the many complications of our intellectual and social belonging, did, we agreed, consider ourselves anthropologists. Despite this marginality, we had no doubts about the part of our identity we shared in common; it had to do with anthropology as a way of life and Egypt. But we still had a problem. The problem was multifaceted one. How did we trace our own genealogy? Which tradition were we supposed to claim? Could we claim the anthropological identity that no one in our fieldwork would recognize?

My friend, who had grown up as a member of a sedentary Bedouin tribe not far from Cairo, had the answer. He proposed that we should think of ourselves as mawawis. The mawawi are responsible for the disappearing art of the itinerant storyteller; the mawawi made it their job to remember or uncover stories from the past in order to re-tell them for the benefit of the present and the future. These storytellers collected and retold stories from different communities everywhere in Egypt. And, metaphorically at least, it seemed to me that my friend was right; that what we were doing was precisely that: collecting and recovering stories from the past for the benefit of the present and the future. It was an intellectual breakthrough.
The essence of what we were interested in was the real stories about changing communities and people’s lives that we had both heard and experienced as children, at a time when time was plentiful and television had yet to enter our lives. It was our interest in our social surroundings, particularly in Egypt and its people and their history that had made us anthropologists or mawawis and had compelled us to tell tales when we grew up. During our field journeys we both met people who-just like us-were interested in real stories about changing communities, yet they had never heard about anthropology. These people are mawawis too.

Unlike my friend, I had never really heard or seen a mawawi while I was growing up. But I grew up listening to my father tell stories about his village at the beginning of the century, about the changes he had witnessed in his lifetime and the stories that had been passed on by previous generations. My storyteller was my father. For both my friend and me, anthropology named the thing we had liked to do anyway as we were growing up: observing and participating in our respective social worlds. We also knew from our respective fieldwork that there are people out there just like us, interested in stories of people, change and difference yet they have never heard of anthropology. Anthropology rationalized our interest in collecting tales beyond those of our immediate social groups, religious affiliates or class and gender.

**Benjamin, Storytelling and Anthropology**

Writing in the first half of this century about a phenomenon that we have witnessed in our lifetime, Benjamin tells us that storytelling has become less and
less frequent. The ability to tell tales properly, the most secure of our possessions, the inalienably human medium for the exchange of experience, was taken away from us.

Benjamin writes,

Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from speech of the many nameless storytellers. Incidentally, among the last named there are two groups which, to be sure, overlap in many ways. And the figure of the storyteller gets its full corporeality only for the one who can picture them both. "When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about," goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions (1968:83-84).

Benjamin tells us that the difference between a true story and information is that the latter does not survive the moment in which it was new. A story on the other hand does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength. It is capable of releasing a story even after a long time (90). Unlike a report or information, a story does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing. It sinks 'the thing' into the life of the storyteller, so that it brings it out of him. Like anthropologists, storytellers usually begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, whether or not they are telling about their own experience (91-92).

There is a lot in common between the anthropologist and the storyteller, or so we would like to believe. We both weave our stories from experience, our own or
those reported to us by others. We, anthropologists and storytellers in turn, make it
the experience of those who listen to our tales and read our ethnographies (87).

Ethnography is a cultural procedure rendered complex by the ongoing act of
translation into a textual form. The ethnographer adopts the dual role of participant
and of recorder/interpreter. The writing of ethnography is also complicated by the
action of multiple subjectivities and political constraints beyond the control of the
anthropologist. Such discursive practice enacts a specific strategy of authority that
has, classically, involved an unquestioned claim for the anthropologist as the
purveyor of truth rather than as storyteller (Clifford 1988:25).

Recent criticism concerning ethnographic authority and the origins of
anthropological knowledge has opened the way for anthropologists to experiment
with alternative writing styles, particularly those that give, or pretend to give, a voice
to the ethnographic other (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Marcus and
Fischer 1986; Marcus 1998).

Textualization is at the heart of the ethnographic endeavor, both in the field
and in the academic setting. One facet of fieldwork is the act of inscribing diverse
contexts of oral discourse through field notes and recordings. But we should not
forget that ethnography originates in orality and makes its transition to writing with
difficulty (Marcus 1986:264-265).

Some of those alternative strategies have consciously claimed the art of
storytelling as a way out of the mono-vocality of the classical ethnographic texts (cf.
Bowen 1954; Taussig 1987; Brown 1991; Ghosh 1992; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Abu-
Lughod 1993a).
Ethnography is the formal space in which an academic anthropologist enters into a dialogue with the current theoretical debates of the discipline. Story telling and theoretical discourse are mingled to represent a personally situated account of what anthropologists have experienced in fieldwork. Abu-Lughod tells us that storytelling, as an ethnographic textual strategy, is a very useful technique to give space to "a different voice" in writing against "culture" (1993a: 4). She writes,

If one merit of the textual technique of storytelling is that is it draws attention to, even as it refuses, the power of social scientific generalization to produce "cultures" (with their differentiation of selves and others), the other merit has to do with feminism's second lesson: the inevitability of positionality. A story is always situated; it has both a teller and an audience. Its perspective is partial (in both senses of the word), and its telling is motivated (1993a:15).

However, it is precisely the motivation of the anthropologist as the new teller of those stories that gives voice, or not, to the original owner of the story, and not the practices of quotations and transcriptions or ventriloquism, to borrow a metaphor from Clifford (1988:46). My motivation is grounded in the desire to know more about Egypt and its people. It is the passion and the commitment of the mawawi that inspired me to seek an anthropological methodology that acknowledges the limitations of any one level of analysis (Marcus 1998:37). With the ethnographic collage of Bateson’s Naven (1958) I found the methodological match for the art of the mawawi.

**Ethnographic Collage**

Ethnographic collage is about "saying more by juxtaposing multiple levels and styles of analysis." It is a methodology that attempts “a comprehensive display of
levels of analysis, of epistemological angles” (Marcus 1998: 37). Collage brings to the ethnographic text elements that proclaim their foreignness to the context of presentation. These elements are marked as real, as collected, rather than invented by the artist-writer. Ethnographic collage is the work where

...[t]he cuts and sutures of the research process are left visible; there is no smoothing over or blending of the work's raw data into a homogeneous representation. To write ethnographies on the model of collage would be to avoid the portrayal of cultures as organic wholes or as unified, realistic worlds subject to a continuous explanatory discourse (Clifford 1988:146).

In the present work I have experimented with writing by combining ethnographic collage and storytelling with analyses. Such experimentation has the potential for undermining my authority as an ethnographer by providing juxtaposed analyses from multiple angles: translations of my research participants' narratives about zar, narratives that I have constructed about some of the research participants, and anthropological reflections and analyses. Ethnographic story retelling, motivated by the desire to share human experience and a commitment to multi-vocality, has been a liberating theoretical position for me. However, as an ethnographer, I have to overcome the charm of storytelling as a mere technique of representation and a writing style. I have to resist the desire for the homogeneity of the ethnographic texts. On the other hand, a real commitment to ethnographic collage where "the cuts and sutures of the research process are left visible," that is, where the traces and scars and tensions between theory and ethnography are consciously preserved, may facilitate this difficult task.

As a complex social event and as a complex concept of reality that is very
alien to Western rationality, zar calls for a complex theoretical understanding. That is why I adopt “ethnographic collage” as an interpretive methodology. The value of collage is that it avoids any overarching argument and acknowledges the limitations of any one level of analysis (Marcus 1998:37) that is necessary to avoid falling into the traps of structural-functionalism. Collage allows experimentation with multi-vocality and with a variety of theoretical frameworks and concepts suitable for grasping the complexity of zar.

4. Description of Chapters

In chapter two of this monograph, I review the literature about spirit possession in anthropology and focus in particularly about the literature on zar in the Middle East. I discuss the influential works of I. M. Lewis (1966; 1967; 1971) and Janice Boddy (1988; 1989) as the dominant paradigm in the anthropological studies of zar. I also discuss the work of Franz Kramer (1993) on African spirit possession. I talk about the utility of the concept of passiones (the opposite of `actions’) that Kramer adapted from Lienhardt’s study of the Dinka in the Sudan (1961) to understanding the phenomena of spirit possession.

Chapter three is about the history and origins of zar and how it migrated with Abyssinian slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to Egypt. I also set the tone to discuss zar as transnational and hybrid phenomena. The chapter also provides an overview of zar practices in Cairo based on my fieldwork. I talk about the relationship of zar and Islam and discuss the zar ritual placation process.

I begin the fourth chapter with a brief introduction about the relevance of
Appadurai's work on the production of locality to zar practices (1996). This is followed by a discussion of zar as a remnant of a guild corporation. I discuss the ritual correspondence between what we know about the Egyptian guild lore from historical records until the nineteenth century following the work of the historian Gabriel Baer (1964) and the practices I recorded during my fieldwork. In this chapter, I also discuss zar divination practices as passiones and present the stories of three diviners as case studies of professional zar activities.

Chapter five is about the association between zar possession crises and those that relate to the anxieties around transitions in the life cycle of a person. I discuss crises related to adolescence, fertility and marriage as well as menopause. I use a variety of narratives to present people's varied perceptions and use for zar. Here I link Appadurai's concept of 'locality' and the ways zar orients the bodies of devotees in time and space.

Chapter six presents a sampler of zar rites and rituals using a realist narration style used in fiction. I start with the art of the openings which open the paths of communication to a cosmological universe of eminent beings which include zar spirits. This chapter also includes a realistic description on the sacrificial procession dedicated to the Grand Lady, one of the most important zar spirits and leader of a spirit pantheon. Chapter seven discusses saint and spirit songs as 'acts of transfer' following Connerton (1989). It also focuses on the most popular zar spirits in Cairo and the different ways through which they are placated in ritual.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: ZAR AND SPIRIT POSSESSION

1. Introduction

Over the past twenty years, an increasing number of anthropologists have started to move away from interpreting spirit possession phenomena as an instrumental strategy for the socially deprived, championed by Lewis (1986). Instead, scholars have increasingly treated spirit possession on its own terms, focusing on its epistemic style contending that spirit possession is a way of knowing the world. Recent studies have interpreted spirit possession through the lenses of local contexts, focusing on cultural logics and human imagination and human creativity.

The cumulative effects of these studies teach us that the spirit possession phenomena do not fulfill a homogeneous task. They are both more and less than therapy, history, art or ethnography, entertainment or social criticism. Spirit possession phenomena in Africa and beyond offer their adherents a multitude of open-ended ways of differentiating identity by imitating and expressing ideas about the cultural other (Kramer 1993). These phenomena also provide a means for ritual reordering of the relationship between self and other, whether it is human or supernatural at multiple levels (Kapferer 1983).

The purpose of this chapter is to survey the literature and give a theoretical
overview of the anthropological study of spirit possession beliefs and practices. I begin this chapter with a review the literature on spirit possession in the Red Sea region. Then I offer a literature survey of works that describe zar in the Middle East, providing a particular focus on zar in Egypt and the Sudan. Then I discuss old and new ways to theoretically frame spirit possession.

The word zar refers to both, a possessing spirit and to a set of reconciliation rites between the possessing spirits and their human hosts. The possessing spirits manifest their anger by causing a variety of social, psychological, and physical ailments for their human hosts; these necessitate ritual reconciliation. Zar practice not only ends the episode of affliction but also establishes and maintains membership in a cult. This elaborate initiatory zar includes sacrifice, blood anointment, preparation of an altar (kursi) with food offerings and candles, perfuming with incense and application of henna to both adept and sacrificial animals. Sometimes the rites also include several masquerade dances enhanced by an elaborate trousseau of clothing and jewelry, in response to music and songs, each marking the hosting of a specific zar in the body of an adept who enters trance (Mazloum 1975; El Hadidi 1997; Battain 1997).

In academic literature zar is known as a possession cult and religious healing practice in the societies around the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Some scholars convincingly argue that zar originated in Ethiopia and spread with the slave trade to other countries in the Middle East (Cerrulli 1934; Natvig 1987; Lewis et. al. 1991). Since the 19th century, zar practices have been observed and recorded in Egypt (El-Masri 1975; El-Eleimy 1993; Kennedy 1978; Battain1997), the Sudan
(Seligman 1914), Ethiopia (Isenberg and Krapf 1843), Somalia (Lewis 1966), and Djibouti (Laurioz 1969).

The African variants of zar, particularly those of Sudan (for example, Zenkovsky 1950; Constantinides 1985, 1991; Boddy 1989; Kenyon 1995; Makris 1996) and Ethiopia (for example, Leiris 1958; Messing 1958) have received much more attention from the scholarly community than those from any other parts of the Middle East. Despite the enormously extensive citation on zar, there are very few published ethnographies on the subject. There are three major published works in Western languages: Leiris's on Ethiopia, in French, (1958), Boddy's on the Sudan, in English, (1989) and Nabhan on Egypt, in German (1994). There are also very few unpublished Ph.D. dissertations on the subject. They are mostly from European institutions: Battain for Egypt (1997); Constantinides for the Sudan (1972) and Ashkanani for Kuwait (1988) and Mallery for a general theoretical overview about zar as psychiatric treatment (1997).

Only a handful of scholars have reported the phenomena in Mecca and other places in Saudi Arabia (Hurgronje 1931; Al-Tayash 1988). In Yemen, zar was observed in Tihama (Bakewell 1985; Moamar 1988), Aden, and Lahej (Kapteijns and Spaulding 1994; Ingrams 1949). Fewer scholars have even reported on the zar in Iraq (Elyas 1977), Kuwait (Ashkanani 1991), Bahrain (Dyksstra 1918), and Iran (Modaressi 1968; Safa 1988). Zar has even been reported among slave descendants as far as Baluchistan in Pakistan (During 1997). It has also recently migrated to new locations with recent Ethiopian immigrant communities in Israel (Grisaru et. al. 1997) and with Sudanese migration to Canada (Boddy 1994b).
2. Writings about Zar in Egypt and Sudan

In Egypt, zar has persisted as an important cultural form, despite more than a hundred years of state repression and rapid, uneven social change and criticism, particularly from the ongoing re-formulations of Islamic orthodoxy (Natvig 1991). While predominantly a female cult, zar draws in men as devotees (Chafey Bey 1862; Kahle 1912; el-Adly 1994), musicians, and cult leaders. Where membership in the cult is inherited, it is mostly through the female line.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, a system of beliefs concerning the power of a conceptually distinct category of spirits known as zar was first reported by Europeans in parts of the Middle East and East Africa (cf. Duff-Gordon 1865; Klunzinger 1878; Hurgronje 1931; Salima 1902). In these travel accounts, zar spirits are constructed as evil demons that possess their hosts and cause them illness. Zar was treated as a belief expressed in a group of curative rituals, which, in form and content, were very similar wherever zar was practiced (Constantinides 1991:85). Those early Western accounts ignored the local variations. Accounts of the Egyptian zar variant by native commentators, who were mostly men, were critical of the practice and quite often set within a discourse of nationalist reform against colonialism (cf. Chafey Bey 1862; Fawwaz 1893).

Much has since been written about the subject, but it remains only superficially explored (see bibliographies by Houry 1980; Makris and Natvig 1991). Many accounts are merely descriptive, and contain reiterated misunderstandings. They tend to ignore the complexity and multifaceted nature of the practice, reducing
it to the healing and cathartic aspects of the cult. The relationship between Islam and zar practices remains poorly explored, despite the obvious and profound connections. Within the lives of individual women, there is a close and intense intertwining of the relationships with certain zar spirits for divination purposes (Abdelsalam 1995; Battain 1993; El Hadidi 1997; Kenyon 1991a; 1991b), the devotional practices of the cult, and Islam. The aggregate effects on women's lives and intuitive faculties and the forging of social relationships in particular localities have yet to be explored.

3. Zar in Egypt

Most scholarly works on zar in Egypt have also overlooked its symbolic aspect, its clear representation of "otherness" (Boddy 1989; Gibbal 1992; Kramer 1993), and its comparability to other regional variants in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf regions. Although early reports compared zar with other spirit possession cults, particularly those in Africa, these merely reflected the theoretical preoccupation of the time. Under the dominant paradigms of the diffusionists, these reports focused on origin and survival of cultural relics from earlier stages of human development (cf. Seligman 1914; Gordon 1929).

When the paradigm shifted to psychologism, a great number of scholars concentrated on the psychological and therapeutic functions of the cult. They viewed the cathartic zar apart from its religious aspect and defined it as psychotherapy.

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9 Battain (1997) is exceptional in that she provides comparative ethnographic data based on her fieldwork in Yemen, Somalia and Djibouti with her more in depth work on Egyptian zar. She also brings forth the African influence in the cult. El Masri (1975) has also compared Egyptian zar cross-culturally to other spirit possession cults. However her presentation suffers from her use of the concept of "primitive rituals."
without accounting for its healing mechanisms or its social aspects (for example among anthropologists, Fakhouri 1968; El Shamy 1972; Kennedy 1978; and among psychiatrists, Okasha 1966; El Sendiony 1974). Folklorists and Orientalists produced mere compilations of zar liturgies (Kahle 1912; Littman 1950; Battain 1997), or material culture and case studies, with little attention to context, social meaning or interpretation (cf. Rodinson 1957; Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1962; Bachinger & Schienerl 1984; Kruk 1993). Even those anthropologists who did not adopt the therapeutic explanation have generally been analytically unsuccessful in dealing with zar (cf. Nelson 1971; El Masri 1975; Al-Guindi 1978; Battain 1991).

Most of the scholars who have focused on zar have concentrated on rendering the phenomenon intelligible to a Western audience, by rationalizing away from the cult's own terms, rather than building on deep understanding. That is to say, shallow reiterated accounts present zar as an exotic cultural survival, a psychotherapeutic ritual complex, or mere compilations of material culture. Most Western scholarly models have not been able to capture the essence of zar. These models are highly rational, and zar simply is not. Apparently grasping that something is being lost in translation, scholars have typically omitted from their accounts aspects of the cult that can be readily dealt with without contradiction, thus simplifying zar to the point that it cannot be comprehended. As persons who definitively remain outsiders, their explanations must be based on their own pre-constructed notions and valuations; but the "otherness" of the phenomenon calls for a conscious demystification of analytical terms (Boddy 1994a).
4. Theories of Spirit Possession

Possession is a broad anthropological term that refers to the integration of spirit and matter, power and corporal reality in a world in which the boundary between an individual and her environment is permeable and negotiable. Recent studies (Comaroff 1985; Kramer 1993; Taussig 1993) suggest that spirit possession is based on epistemic premises very different from "the infinitely differentiation, rationalizing, and reifying thrust of global materialism and its attendant scholarly traditions." Zar continues to hold the anthropological gaze because it appears dramatically exotic and unrecognizable to those schooled in rationality (Boddy 1994a: 407).

Relatively few anthropologists have made serious contributions to the ethnography and theory of zar possession. Among anthropologists, the seminal attempts at analyzing zar come from Ian C. Lewis's peripheral cult theory (1966; 1967; 1971; 1986; 1991) and Janice Boddy's ethnography of Sudanese zar (1988; 1989). Sohair Morsy's analysis of sick roles in a rural Egyptian village provides useful insights (1978; 1991 and 1993). However, the most interesting theoretical understanding of the alien spirit possession phenomenon comes from the armchair ethnological approach of the German art historian Franz Kramer (1993).

Kramer's Understandings of African Spirit Possession

In The Red Fez: Art and Spirit Possession in Africa, Kramer (1993) draws our attention to the association between the African cults of alien spirit possession and plastic and performative art forms based on mimetic representation of strangers. He
proposes mimesis as a way of knowing, and as an alternative to Western rationality. To follow this logic we have to turn to Lienhardt's ethnography of the Dinka in the Sudan (1961), from which Kramer adopts the concept of *passiones*.

Unlike Westerners who perceive of the past as derived from the mind or the imagination of the remembering self, the Dinka experience people, places, or events of the past as having their own points of reference, as active agents. These places and events have their own active agency that acts on human beings. In the same way, a "Power" is a kind of presence acting on the self from without. A Dinka images her experience as a passive agent and as an object of Power. The Dinka separates an image, the active counterpart of the passive element in human experience, from the self in order to deal with affliction caused by Power so recognized (1961:149-153). To explain such modes of experiencing reality, Lienhardt writes,

> It is perhaps significant that in ordinary English usage we have no word to indicate an opposite of `actions' in relation to the human self. If the word `passions', *passiones*, were still normally current as the opposite of `actions', it would be possible to say that the Dinka Powers were the images of human *passiones* seen as the active sources of those *passiones* (1961:151).

*Passiones*, then, constitute a mode of experience which can no longer be precisely described in modern Western languages; it is the opposite of actions in relation to the human self. Kramer explains that the possessed are "being moved by" the alien spirits experienced not as actions or abstraction but as images of *passiones*. The possessed experiences himself or herself as an object in which the Power of the cosmos recurs in the person. The agency is with the Power, not within the individual self. Kramer cautions us against translating the cosmological into
psychological terms. For him, the *passiones* are psychic states, transient moods or a lasting mark or imprint which form under the "impression" left but can only be understood as particular cosmological encounters which are powerfully impinging in ways that are not obvious or readily understood (1993:60-62). “The powers of the cosmos, both animals and landscapes,” he states, “recur in the person possessed, so that we can truly speak of *passiones* of an experienced reality” (1993:61).

Despite the lack of a precise word to describe such modes of experience, Kramer finds in present-day Western practice a behavior denoting comparable modes resonating in a vocabulary that he views as a remnant of a cosmology. He writes,

> The terms possessed, filled and moved refer to mental states which we view as neither normal nor morbid. In all three cases we are talking about *passiones* rather than actions. Sometimes the individual appears to be a sort of mount, ridden or obsessed by notions or passions, at others a vessel filled with feelings, and in the end as one moved by the sublime, whereby the latter is said mostly either with a touch of irony or in literary speech. Despite the passive formulation, each of the three states manifests itself in its own characteristic patterns of behavior which, however, we can not simply construe as conscious and deliberate actions (1993:62).

Kramer proposes that Africans have transformed alien phenomena into types, as images of *passiones*; these have been incorporated as spirits into local traditions. Strangers provide the material for an allegorical “take” whose purpose is to communicate what is “other” to one’s culture. The common theme among these possession cults is not in the social function they fulfill, but rather in their representational character and their concept of reality. The mimetic representation through ritual enactment of “otherness”, its personification, and its cult paraphernalia remain the uniting features among these cults. This mimesis stems from an
experiential epistemology based on imagination rather than rationality. This imagination is "a complicated structure of heterogeneous elements: words and pictures. We shall then not think of operating with written or oral signs as something to be contrasted with the operation with "mental images" of the events (Wittgenstein1979:7e).

The Theory of Peripheral Cults

I. M. Lewis (1971) advances a theory of spirit possession focusing on what he typifies as peripheral cults, based on his study of sar (a local variant of zar found in Northern Somaliland) and his cross cultural overview of other possession cults which involve spirits that "are not central to the maintenance of morality in a particular society." He explains that zar is a mystical mode of defusing grievances between men and women (1967:626). Women are passive agents in the religious domain. The prominent role of women in spirit-possession cults is a compensation mechanism for their exclusion and lack of authority in other spheres (1986:27-28). Lewis links the definition of women as powerless and amoral with the peripherality of the zar to the moral order. Lewis's propositions remain highly contested (cf. Wilson 1967; Kapferer 1983; Giles 1987; Boddy 1989, 1994a; Lambek 1993; Morsy 1993). That is mainly because it is not correct to assume a priori that women's religious "work" is peripheral to that of men. "Not only do women too practice the central, day to day rites of Islam, but in their performances they may carry a religious load often of greater transcendental importance to the community than that borne by men" (Tapper & Tapper 1987:72).
The critics of Lewis's status deprivation hypothesis suspect its accuracy and attack his static use of the construct (Wilson 1967:628). Kapferer criticizes Lewis and his followers for unduly reducing all multiplicity of factors that might motivate preponderance of women in spirit possession cults to a single limited set which cannot be generalized or explain the pattern as a whole (1983: 96-97). Lewis' use of the term "peripheral" to qualify women's possession cults reflects a highly subjective and evaluative view. Giles criticizes Lewis for this construct which assumes that men are central to the moral order while women are peripheral. Attention to the perception of the cult participant would portray possession as a means of establishing contact with supernatural forces that are crucial to society (1987:235-236).

In a recent review article Boddy argues against the assumption that spirit possession constitutes an independent category of behavior. This assumption has led Lewis to transcend native epistemologies and to replace them with an objective analytical framework under the category "ecstatic religions." The typologies used by Lewis often blind researchers to the complexities of the ethnographic situation (1994:409-410). Lambek criticizes Lewis for attempting to explain possession in terms of conscious behavior; not only does it violate local perceptions, but it also fails to acknowledge that the very essence of the system is to transcend conscious wishes (1993:313).

Women are active in possession, not because they wish to use it in a battle against men or even in a status competition among themselves, but because it gives them greater scope and authority in activities in which they have always taken an interest: articulating social relations, maintaining peace and order within their families and taking responsibility of reproduction (1993: 334).
Despite these contestations, Lewis' work remains very influential and no serious work on spirit possession can be carried out without addressing his theory of pipherality.

**Variations on Lewis' Theory of Peripheral Cults**

Janice Boddy's study of *zar* in Hofriyat, a rural community in Northern Sudan, is the only extensive English-language ethnography of *zar* yet published (1989). She describes the multifaceted influence of *zar* on the lives of ordinary women. Her work on *zar* reaches a new level of ethnographic richness. She explains how *zar* participation cultivates appreciation for ambiguity in gender constructs, personal relationships, and cultural typification (1989:341-342). However, her analysis suffers somewhat from her interpretation of *zar* in terms of texts to be read. Boddy endows the ceremony with an intellectually reflective function, when to the participant it is an experiential performance (Abu-Lughod 1993b).

Boddy compares *zar* to the genre of post-Renaissance satirical allegory. Accordingly, *zar* ceremony is conceived as an "indigenous text that unfolds anew with every ritual performance" with multiple levels of meaning, both explicit and implicit. She reads the wedding symbolism\(^{10}\) in *zar* initiation as an allegorical "pretext." Its implied meaning is a muted, counter-hegemonic commentary on marriage--the seat of feminine identity and a source of disenchchantment--in the lives of the possessed. According to Boddy,

\(^{10}\) *Zar* initiation ceremony is based on a wedding metaphor in which the initiand is called a bride.
Controversial realities are embedded in overt text performance, and each gains from association with the other. Possession ritual, viewed as allegorical genre, is designed to compel the imagination; in making an adjustment between the apparent meaning of the rite and its multiple connotations, a participant leaps to the significance of the zar and is initiated to its course. This is, and given its potential subversiveness, must be, a personal, subjective, transformation. But because of that it may be therapeutic. For if discovery occurs through a participant's own intellectual effort, if, in other words, she restructures the zar text by reflecting in her own imagination the creative process it embodies, thus renewing the inner consciousness of the work (cf. Honig 1966:29), then her consciousness of her own position in Hofriyati society may grow (1989:340).

For women, everyday identity or social position may be jeopardized because of difficult circumstances, such as infertility, divorce, or loss of children, a husband or loved ones. Janice Boddy shows how the Sudanese zar provides an opportunity to redress these problems by stressing that which lies beyond their immediate society. She argues that zar opens the possibility of "otherness," that of the zar and that of the women who feel jeopardized. In the zar, with its themes of alien spirits, these women's feelings of personal otherness, caused by specific circumstances, meet with allegory and ritual, which strengthen their identities. Participation in the zar creates a positive appreciation for the existential as opposed to the ideal demanded in structured everyday life.

According to Boddy, with zar trance the "introjected" and the culturally overdetermined self may be repositioned and perhaps transcended. It provides the cult member with the possibility of insight (1989:350). The vocabulary of zar is a metaphoric variation on the themes of daily life (marriage). Zar reflects "a counterreality, wherein salient social values and cultural orientations are played with,
reassessed, weighted differently than in everyday life, opened up to other interpretations" (1989:156-7).

The Perception of Zar in a Rural Community in Egypt

Sohair Morsy provides a new set of data on the Egyptian zar in her study of sick roles and gender in a village of the Nile Delta. Morsy's work on zar is less comprehensive than that of Boddy. However, she provides an interesting analysis, focusing on the social context of possession. She proposes 'uzr (literally, excuse), an Egyptian zar variant, as a "culturally sanctioned dissent" (1993:18). She develops Lewis's status deprivation hypothesis beyond its correlation with femaleness by demonstrating that this possession affliction is indicative of powerlessness among both female and male informants. She argues that once 'uzr is "made social" through the identification of the afflicting spirits by means of ritual, and by securing support of the claim to the sick role from members of the village community, the now culturally legitimated "excuse" allows the transgression of the established power relations and of core cultural principles (1993:124-5).

Morsy argues that the possessed is then able to resist the socially sanctioned authority of fathers, brothers, and husbands, as well as mothers, sisters and wives. Failure to achieve core cultural imperatives is among the socially tolerated or justified transgressions. These core cultural imperatives include parenthood, securing family livelihood, and adherence to sexual norms as in the case of incest, homosexuality, and extramarital affairs (Morsy 1993:123-146).
5. Conclusion

Lewis (1967, 1971), Boddy (1989) and Morsy (1993) build their theoretical approach to zar possession by developing Gluckman’s “ritual of rebellion” hypothesis. Gluckman explained ritual reversal in African societies he observed as an expression of dramatized structural conflicts. These structural conflicts which are not controlled in distinct secular institutions are expressed in ritual to maintain social equilibrium (1963:136). For Gluckman, "every social system is a field of tension, of ambivalence, of co-operation and contrasting struggle.” “Rituals of rebellion” allow "unbridled excess," an expression within the bounds of social order, to keep the rebellion in check. So the enactment of conflicts, through the inversion of social roles or other symbolic forms, stresses "the social cohesion” within which certain conflicts exist (1963:127).

Lewis’ and Boddy’s models of resistance locate this structural conflict between husband and wife and make marriage, rather than oppression by the ruling elite, the structural principle that zar addresses. I don’t see that either was able to substantiate this hard-to-prove premise empirically. The conflict between husbands and wives is assumed by both authors, and is their own cultural projection. Unfortunately the sophisticated approach of Boddy, informed by feminist theory and hermeneutic interpretation, leads her back to Lewis’ functionalist position that she rejected in the first place.

The transgressive and subversive mechanisms in zar cannot be interpreted by a simple functionalist conflict model. Zar can best be explored through rigorous socio-historical analyses and open multiple methodologies. I agree with Scott’s
criticism of the ritual of rebellion hypothesis to explain complex social events such as carnival (or zar). In his views such interpretations are "an untenable essentialism." Carnival (or zar) is "the ritual site of various forms of social conflict and symbolic manipulation, none of which can be said, prima facie, to prevail" (1990:178).

The literature demonstrates that zar cults buffer the individual caught in difficult structural conditions by creating a community with a shared experience of otherhood (Boddy 1989; Gibbal 1992; Kramer 1993), particularly for the most vulnerable identities, those related to gender and sexuality (Boddy 1989; Morsy 1993). Members of a zar community buffer each other's pains and misfortunes through friendships, mutual sympathy, communal dance, entertainment and conversations outside the immediate kin group (Saunders 1977; Eisler 1985).

It makes perfect sense that zar provides a socially sanctioned space for transgressions within one's own community (Morsy 1993), and that participants find inspiration in images and stereotypes of what is socially defined as other than one's own. Social norms are only binding to actors whose identities have not been contested. Those who are afflicted, and inhabited by alien beings, are no longer bound by the canons and ideals that govern the lives of members of the wider community. That is to say, those possessed with zar, with their ambiguous identities, are no longer held responsible for their actions. In fact, they are no longer themselves. Zar is experienced as passione, as a cosmological encounter. That is why I argue that the key to understanding zar on its own terms is not to reduce it to some function but to consider its representational character and its concept of reality.
CHAPTER III
FROM ABYSSINIA TO CAIRO: THE ZAR RITUAL COMPLEX

1. Introduction: Origin and Etymology

Zar is a spirit possession ritual complex found in societies around the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The word zar refers to a possessing spirit which causes affliction and to a set of reconciliation rites between such spirits and their human hosts. Zar ritual complex is essentially a sacrificial rite carried out to pacify and gain the favor of the afflicting spirits. The conception of zar spirits is mostly inspired by groups who are culturally defined as “other” or “outsiders” by the participants. Reconciliation with zar spirits may also include trance dances in response to songs. Trance dances mark the hosting of a specific spirit in the body of the possessed. The essence of zar is much the same throughout this region, but the history and details vary both between and within societies.

This chapter lays the bases for understanding zar spirit possession as practiced in Cairo from the late 1990s until today. I begin with a short overview about the history and origin of zar in the Red Sea region. I discuss the grounds for thinking about zar in Egypt as a transnational phenomenon emerging as a result of the continuous movement of people with their cultural practices. Then I follow with descriptive overview of the zar rituals practiced in Cairo, and their characteristic elements based on my fieldwork.
There are very few records of zar before the nineteenth century. The oldest written record where the word zar is used to mean “possessing spirit” was found in a religious text written in Ge’ez \(^{11}\) was in the sixteenth century in Abyssinia (Natvig 1987). In the absence of observation accounts, it is impossible to know if zar rituals as we know it had already developed in the sixteenth century. The earliest recorded observation of zar rituals as we know them today is from the beginning of the nineteenth century in Ethiopia. A description of a zar ceremony was recorded by two missionaries in 1839 (Makris and Natvig 1991).

The etymology of the word zar is obscure (cf. Fakhouri 1968; Constantinides 1991). Most scholars agree that the word zar is neither Arabic nor Amharic. Various scholars have advanced different hypotheses concerning its linguistic origin. Cerulli (1934) argued that the word is Amharized from a Cushitic language; specifically in Agaw, the word Jar refers to the God of Heaven (see also Natvig 1987). Nelson (1971:194) follows a mistaken etymological link between the Arabic words zar and ziyara (visit) (for a critique of theis etymology, see El Shitenawi et al. 1983:330). Writing about Persian zar, Modarressi (1968:150-151) suggests a Persian origin of the cult, since in Persian, the word zar as a noun means mourning and crying, while as an adjective, it means thin and weak. More recently, Abdelsalem (1994:75) erroneously suggested a link between zar and zahara (to appear).

The movement of people across the Red Sea from Arabia and Yemen to Abyssinia and vice versa has been going on for centuries. The absence of reference to zar rituals in the historical, travel, and linguistic accounts before the 19th century

\(^{11}\) Ge’ez is an Abyssinian liturgical language related to Amharic.
makes it impossible to definitively locate the origin of zar in only one society.\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, local ideas about the origin of zar in Ethiopia point to an Arab origin (Sundrum 1909), whereas in Egypt, zar songs refer to both Abyssinian and Yemeni origins. Theories of zar origin in both countries follow the logic of zars as alien spirits inspired by groups of familiar outsiders (my emphasis).

The term zar may have been borrowed from Old Hebrew.\textsuperscript{13} The long-established presence of Jewish communities and their historic influence as merchants and craftsmen in the Red Sea Region could lead one to believe that it is indeed possible. After all, in Modern Hebrew, the word zar means stranger or foreigner (Baltsan 1992:460). Interestingly, the Hebrew etymology is derived from the root word zwr, which means "to turn aside, deviate, go away," and its participle zr, the "one who distances or removes himself." Hence, the word has been interpreted in different contexts of the Old Testament sometimes as "foreign Gods," or "that which does not belong," "unchaste woman," "stranger," or "outsider" (Botterweck & Ringgren 1974:52-58; Ben-Naeh 1993).

Silver and goldsmithing were mainly in the hands of old Sephardic Jewish communities in many parts of the Middle East, including Yemen and Egypt. Given the importance of jewelry in relation to zar cults and its association with alien spirits, it is plausible that the word was passed from the jewelers to the participants. If so, then the

\textsuperscript{12} I would like to suggest a different way of thinking about the origin of zar. Rather than locating zar in a particular society, we need to think of zar as emerging among societies through repeated cultural contact. Zar is a transnational hybrid phenomenon resulting from continuous interaction among different groups of people in the Red Sea Region.

\textsuperscript{13} Franke (1913:284) reports that Jewish dealers were selling zar jewelry to adepts in Cairo early in the twentieth century.

47
term "stranger" would refer not only to the ethnic difference between the smiths and their clients, but also to the otherness of the spirits to their hosts.

2. Egyptian Zar as a Transnational Phenomenon

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the etymology of the word zar, there are many indications that zar trickled from Abyssinia to Egypt through the slave trade no later than the nineteenth century and perhaps earlier. Most importantly, some spirit names recorded in Abyssinia in the early part of the nineteenth century appear in the Egyptian zar pantheon. Moreover, some historians have noted that there has been an increase in the sale of Abyssinian female slaves in Egypt starting in the eighteenth century (Marsot 1995). These were incorporated into the harems of both urban and rural families, and often married one of their male members. Consequently, these Abyssinian harem women introduced their cultural practices into Egyptian society. Western and indigenous writers during the 19th century almost always associated zar with black slave communities (Littman 1951; Natvig 1987).

One can imagine that the assimilation of Abyssinian ideas about the nature of zar spirits into the Egyptian world view was not difficult. After all, the concept of zar as invisible spirits resonates strongly with the Muslim idea of jinn. To the Egyptian Muslim participants, zar is a category of jinn mentioned in the Koran. As zar developed, it increasingly syncretized with popular Islam, absorbing and mixing with local beliefs and practices. Today, zar practice continues to incorporate new elements and new understandings in response to change in Egyptian society and in Islamic interpretation.
Zar is a transnational phenomenon. Not only did it move to Egypt with the Abyssinian female slaves, but it has also developed amid the continuous movement of people throughout the Middle East as well as East and West Africa. Elements of other spirit possession ritual complexes, such as North African derdeba of the gnawa and the stambali and the West African bori were also absorbed into Egyptian zar as practiced in Cairo and Alexandria.

During my fieldwork, I came across some Hausa bori words used to describe important ritual zar elements in Cairo.\(^\text{14}\) I also heard a Morrocan gnawa tune that was identical to a familiar zar tune from Cairo, only the words were different. Moreover, some North African spirits make their way into the zar pantheon (Paques 1991). That is in addition to the transplanting of zar tambura practices which traveled with Sudanese migrants during Anglo-Egyptian rule. The complexity and multicultural nature of zar in Cairo and Alexandria indicate that it had a different historical development from the zar practiced in Upper Egypt.

My fieldwork in Cairo reveals that zar is infinitely malleable. The form of a given iteration of the ritual is adapted to the lives and experiences of those who participate, and their reasons for participation in a specific ceremony. Zar reflects the diversity of peoples who have participated in it, and who have introduced to it elements from far-away places. Whatever the details, the central component of zar is sacrifice and offering rites to placate the spirits, followed by a period of liminality and seclusion. These rites may also add several masquerade dances, enhanced by

\(^{14}\) For example, the word Kodiya (designating the officiant of the zar-il-sit ritual) originates from the Hausa word godiya, meaning horse or mount. The word Mayanga (the place where sacrificial bones are ritually buried) derives from the Hausa word for cemetery (Besmer: 1977)
clothing and jewelry, in response to music and songs, each marking the hosting of a specific alien spirit in the body of an adept who may enter trance.

3. Egyptian Conceptions of Zar

Egyptian zar spirits are identified as ghosts ('afareet), or a wind (reeh) or as datour or zar (spirit and spirits), or simply as masters (assyad). Zar possession is conceptualized as earthly touch (lamsah ardiya). The relationship between the possessed and his or her possessing spirit is expressed in a clothing metaphor; a possessed person is said to be worn by the spirit (malboos). A person possessed by zar is referred to as me'afrat, maryuh or as menzar.

Zar masters are a category of jinn. These are invisible and supernatural spirits conceptualized as a human double, the qarin. The zar/qarin is a kind of spirit familiar attached to every human being. The nature of jinn contrasts sharply with that of human beings. According to the popular Islamic conception of the world, God created the invisible zar/jinn of wind and fire, and fashioned the visible humans from earth and water (Boddy 1988). He then gave both of them the earth to inhabit and populate.

The zars have since lived in social groups, modeled after, but not of, the human world. However, their world intersects with ours in deserted places, dark areas, doorways, staircases, around water sources, and in the cemeteries. Zar spirits are particularly fond of places that Egyptians associate with pollution (nagassa) and filth (khabassa), such as toilets and garbage dumps. According to
possession narratives that I heard in Cairo, the first experience of zar spirit
possession is often sited in domestic bathrooms.

4. Zar and Islam

Alien Spirits and Islamic Cosmology

The corpus of song and ritual performances I collected in Cairo reveal a
popular Islamic conception of the world. Zar is a devotional practice to several
interconnected and overlapping constellations of supernatural beings which have the
power to affect the everyday lives of humans and grant good health and prosperity.
At the pinnacle of this universe is God, Allah. Just below him are all the prophets.
Those mentioned by name are Adam, Noah and his sons, Ham and Sam as well as
Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammad. The devotees, who are nearly all
Moslems, hold the Prophet Mohammad\textsuperscript{15} in a special position. This conception also
includes local Muslim and Christian saints and zar\textit{jinn} of different religions.

Zar spirits form an elaborate organization with several overlapping categories
and pantheons. Zar\textit{jinns} include the \textit{meluk} or kings: the kings of the heavens, the
kings of the earth, and the kings of the seas. Then there are the \textit{salateen} (sultans).
These include the Sultan of the Red, the Yellow and the Green jinn. Next comes the
\textit{hurras} or the guards of doorways or thresholds and many other categories, not all of
which are specifically named. These include some unnamed angels as well as some
devils.

\textsuperscript{15} The prophet's family, companions, the four caliphs and those who are dear to the prophet
(\textit{ahbaab}) are also included.
The population of spirits is also organized into different pantheons corresponding to a variety of human ethnic groups that are culturally defined as "other" by the participants. In Cairo, there are zar spirits from Sudan, Nigeria, Abyssinia, China, India, and Upper Egypt. Some are Coptic Christians or Ottoman Turks and others are Bedouin Arabs or North African Sharifs, descendants of the Prophet Mohammad.

The Criticism of Islamic Fundamentalists

In Egypt zar practice has been criticized by a stream of orthodox and fundamentalist Islamic reformers, starting at the end of nineteenth century. In their attempt to reformulate fundamental Islamic values, to correct practices, and to purge the Muslim nation (umma) from falsehood, zar has been deemed not only as an alien superstition and non-Islamic innovation (bid'a), but also as a heretic practice (sherk). The explicit source of contention is the fundamentalists' rejection of the idea of supernatural mediation between Muslims and God.

Associated with popular Sufi understandings of Islam, mediation (shafa'a) has been practiced by a large Muslim population. It encompasses a variety of religious rituals and understandings, including saint shrine visitations and the supernatural eminence of ahl il-beit (the Prophet Mohammad's family and descendants). In addition to theology, fundamentalist Muslims criticize music and dance and the mixing of the genders. Their most pressing concern is the heresy of the zar sacrificial rite itself. The orthodox reformers contend that offering can only be made to God, while the Muslim participants of zar view their sacrificial offering as an act of reconciliation with jinn in the name of God.
The devotees refute this accusation by arguing within the core Islamic belief and values that God created the zar and its afflictions. To the participants, zars are always secondary to God and the prophets. Despite the fact that devotees regard possession and its symptoms as a calamity, they still consider both zar and other Islamic ritual practice as part of their general religious experience (see also Constantinides 1972; Boddy 1989). I personally think that the orthodox reformers are particularly adamant about opposing zar because it is a woman-centered practice.

5. Spirit Afflictions and their Symptoms

There are said to be sixty-six zar spirits. No zar leader I have talked to can name them all; in fact, no leader name all the same spirits. There are always discrepancies between one cult and another. Zar spirits are organized into pantheons of extended families. The basic unit within each family is a pair of male and female spirits, who are usually brother and sister. They have ethnic origins, professions, personalities, characters, and above all, idiosyncrasies.

Some scholars have repeated the construction of zar as demonic and evil, which reflects Christian influence on 19th century accounts of the phenomenon. For example, Kennedy states that the zar is a means of dealing with the demonic power of evil (1978:204). Fakhouri (1968:50) and Nelson (1971:197) refer to zar as "evil spirits." Despite the inclusion of devils among the general population of zar/jinn, common zar spirits are not necessarily evil or harmful. By contrast, zars are whimsical, capricious, and vengeful.
A wide range of common everyday human behavior may provoke possession and its consequent symptoms. Zar spirits become angry at the most trivial human offense, as when the unaware human being steps on, pokes, or throws hot water over an invisible spirit or wakes a group of spirits up from deep sleep by shouting or crying after sunset. Such actions trigger the zar spirits retaliation with possession and its symptoms. Playboy male spirits may also become jealous and offended when the human object of their affection misbehaves. This is often the case of a teenager who puts on too much make-up, or spends a great deal of time looking at her reflections in the mirror and making herself beautiful for others. The polluting drops of menstrual or hymen blood may also offend the spirit of the latrine.

A person may also become possessed by a particular spirit as a result of mocking or criticizing the possession of others. The consumption of zar sacrificial meat while not initiated also may trigger possession. Finally, exposure to the evil eye (nazrah) and other types of witchcraft and sorcery (‘aral) may also render a person vulnerable to possession. The angry spirit or spirits punish the human offender through possession and its subsequent symptoms.

Among old initiates, recurring afflictions may sometimes be attributed to their failure to fulfill promises of offerings made to zar spirits, or their inability to carry out cyclical zar ritual obligations. Disposing of spirit paraphernalia may also be ground for zar spirit anger that would result in a spirit possession affliction crisis.

The possessing spirits manifest their anger and execute their punishment by causing a variety of social, psychological, and physical ailments for their human hosts. Persistent symptoms that cannot be explained by common sense and fall out
of the realm of the ordinary are grounds for suspecting possession. These symptoms of possession necessitate ritual reconciliation and the fulfillment of the demands (talabat) of the spirit or spirits in question.

Zar initiation not only ends the episode of affliction but also establishes and maintains membership in a cult. Physical symptoms which are not readily cured by biomedicine are indications of zar possession. These include a wide range of symptoms such as persistent headaches, continuous rheumatic pain, weight loss, nausea, and loss of appetite. Infertility and miscarriage may also bring a person to zar membership. A wide range of psychological behaviors (including unexplainable bouts of anger or aggression) and states of sadness or fear may also be symptomatic of zar possession.

Possession may also be attributed to socially risky behavior such as homosexuality, and inexplicable failure to get married. Unexplainable problems with business or trade may be resolved by ritual reconciliation with zar spirits. The physical symptoms of zar may be cured through initiation; while the behavioral symptoms may receive a social justification, which allows them to be tolerated by the wider community. The socially unacceptable behavior is seen as a result of affliction (Morsi 1993).

6. Gender, Class and Zar Participation

Zar is a woman-centered practice; women’s knowledge of zar, its symptoms and its ritual reconciliation is part of the ritual division of labor between the sexes (Lambek 1998; Boddy 1989). Women know much more about zar than men. While
predominantly a female cult, zar draws in men as devotees, musicians and cult leaders. Where possession by zar spirits is inherited, it is mostly passed on through the female line (see also Messing 1958). In such a case, the devotees are referred to as ‘born into incense’ (ibn or bint bkhur).

In much of the literature on zar in Egypt, women are the main participants in zar (Fakhouri 1968; Kennedy 1967; Nelson 1971; Okasha 1966). However, men also participate; they are more likely to participate in secret, and it is thus difficult to know what proportion of the devotees consists of men. What is clear is that men who are involved in zar as devotees have most often been introduced to zar by women. Most of the participating men I have witnessed in zar gatherings have been accompanied by a wife, a sister, a female relative or a neighbor.

There are many ways of participating in and identifying with the zar ritual complex. The devotees are known as such because they have passed through the process of initiation into zar. Others may participate by listening to zar tapes or by watching video tapes without necessarily attending zar ceremonies. Yet others may attend, and participate in dancing into trance and other ritual activities without having been initiated. And while serious affliction in one form or another is reason for participating in zar, there are people who participate without reporting affliction of any sort.

Zar draws in a variety of people from all classes and educational and professional backgrounds. In any given cult gathering one finds a variety of social backgrounds and education. Public zar is costly, and thus it draws mostly people with substantial means. However, some cults are composed of more affluent devotees than
others. For example, the clients participating in zar gatherings located in the village Abul Gheit, north of Cairo, are more likely to be rural uneducated peasants or housemaids working in Cairo with limited incomes. The cult gathering (hadra) located in the older part of Cairo attracts more affluent clients who live either in the surrounding popular (sha'abi) neighborhoods or come from middle class neighborhoods.

In addition to zar musicians and their families, zar participation includes a variety of professional and social backgrounds. In any given zar ceremony, one may find physicians, nurses, teachers, butchers, business women and men and their families, singers, and actresses from all over Cairo as well as wives and daughters of the affluent traders and artisans from the surrounding neighborhoods. This is in addition to some dervishes and beggars who spend all their earnings on zar. Most zar leaders in Cairo enjoy the patronage of at least a few affluent clients from middle class Cairo even when their weekly cult gatherings attract much poorer devotees.

7. Zar Professionals: Leaders and Musicians

The key personnel in zar are organized hierarchically and professionally. They include troupes of musicians, ritual leaders of both genders and their assistants. The bands of musicians are organized according to their musical specialization: Upper Egyptian bands, Sudani (Sudanese) or Tambura, zar is-sit (the zar of the Grand Lady), and Gheitaniya (followers of Saint Hassan Abul Gheit). Each band has at least one lead singer who directs the troupe. The Tambura lead singer is referred to as Sangak (a high rank in the Mamluk army), whereas in the case of Upper Egyptian and Gheitaniya troupes he or she is referred to as rayess(a) (leader). Some
musicians perform more than one type of music. Musicians mostly follow the profession of their parents or relatives.

Ritual leaders are referred to as *sheikh*(a); however, those women who specialize in *zar is-sit* (*zar* of the Grand Lady) are referred to as *Kodiya* (Hausa horse or mount). Not all *kodiyas* are *zar* leaders. Only those who have undergone several initiations and are members of the cult of the Grand Lady may become *Kodiyas*. While the majority of ritual leaders are women, there are also men. In such a case, to maintain sexual propriety, the mother or wife of the *sheikh* officiates the different rites for female initiands in the sheikh place particularly when it comes to blood anointment.

Cult leadership is signified by an incense burner and a box of incense that links the leader to his or her main spirit. To become a *zar* leader an initiand must identify his or her main spirit, the master of his or her head (*sid ir-ras*) in a special *zar* ceremony called the girding (*il-hizam*). In theory, each spirit is associated with a different type of incense. However, in practice, for example, Sheikha Anhar and her daughter Karima use a mélange of incense concocted by the spice merchant following their own preferences.

Cult leaders perform several roles. They use a variety of divination techniques to identify the afflicted spirits with the assistance of their own main spirits, the spirit of their head (*seed ir-ras*). Ritual leaders also manage the contractual relationship between clients and musicians. They officiate at the sacrificial rite, prepare the offering tables and guide the inexperienced initiand's relationship with her *zar* spirits. Some ritual leaders are also leaders of musical bands. Most of these have not really
undergone special initiations but act as sheikhs anyway. Some others inherit their
calling from one of their parents. These have a special ceremony in which they
receive the incense burner and box of one of their parents. Some others are old
initiates who have advanced in the path of zar. These were chosen by their own
spirits to become zar healers and diviners.

When old initiates undergo the special zar initiation that makes them leaders
they prepare a new incense burner and incense box for the ceremony. In this girding
ceremony, the incense burner and box are anointed with the blood of the sacrificial
animals. In such a case the animals sacrificed may include two sheep, a camel, or a
bull. Not all those who become cult leaders through this type of initiation join the zar
profession and receive monetary compensation from their clients. Some initiated
sheikhs or sheikhas volunteer their services for their friends and loved ones; they
are referred to as sheikh habaybo or sheikhat-habayebha. When the diviner does
not provide service to others, he is referred to as sheikh nafso (his own) in the case
of a male leader, and as sheikhat-nafsa (her own) in the case of a female leader.

8. The Zar Rituals Placation Process

Identification of Affliction

The first stage of the placation process is the identification of zar affliction. This
a long process which is full of uncertainties and experimentation based on trial and
error. When a person first begins to show some of the symptoms that can be attributed
to possession by an angry zar, her immediate group may not suspect zar possession
right away, particularly if they are not affiliated with the cult. They may simultaneously
resort to a variety of healing options. For example, a woman who is suffering from continuous migraine may be taken by her group, kin or neighbors to a Coptic priest who practices exorcism, to a sheikh who heals with Koranic amulets or performs an exorcism ritual using the Koran, to a physician or to several of these healing options simultaneously (Battain 1993).

Non-members are reluctant to be initiated into zar as a first healing option, because membership requires long-term commitment and considerable expense. Once initiated, the afflicted person will much more readily consult a cult mistress for recurrence of symptoms rather than alternative healers or physicians. An initiate may even begin to identify her zar spirits and their demands for reconciliation on her own without help from anybody. This person may continue to consult physicians as well. In some cases, the desire for healing motivates the afflicted to resort simultaneously to both the biomedical and the zar route. For example, when a cult member undergoes a serious operation, such as mastectomy or amputation, with a successful outcome, a reconciliation ceremony would still take place. This is partly is a sign of gratitude to the zar spirits for a successful biomedical operation. Generally, various healing options may be tried, but if they do not result in alleviation of symptoms, then possession with zar is seriously considered.

In such a case, a cult mistress and/or an old initiate are consulted to mentor the afflicted person in identifying the zar spirits that possess her. Identifying the afflicting spirit or spirits and the afflicted person’s demands, which are essential for reconciliation and healing, is not a simple matter, particularly the first time. It may be a long process that involves one or more different zar identification rituals over time. A cult mistress
may be called to the home of the afflicted person to perform a ritual with special zar incense. Attracted by the aroma of the incense, each possessing spirit may then make itself visible by taking over the identity of the afflicted person immediately or by making her sleepy and appearing in her dreams. If the spirits are particularly stubborn and resistant to revealing their identity, or the afflicted did not undergo the home consultation, another ritual called Kasf il-atar (revealing the trace) is performed by the cult mistress in her own residence.

*Kasf il-atar* is a divination technique involving the use of a piece of cloth which has been used by the afflicted and has the smell of her body. The name of the afflicted and that of her mother are written on a piece of paper and given to the cult leader. Before going to sleep, the cult mistress performs a rite with burning incense, and then she places the atar and the piece of paper under her pillow for three consecutive nights, a process which is termed *tabyita*. The identity of the possessing spirits is revealed to a cult leader through dreams. Old initiates may also identify the possessing spirits through coffee cup reading or other means of divination.\(^{16}\)

In all cases, the cult leader and the old initiate divine by means of each one’s own possessing master, the master of their head (*sid ir-ras*). The afflicted may also attend up to three public ceremonies (*hadra*). The response of the afflicted to particular tunes will confirm the identity of the spirits causing the affliction. Sometimes the cult leaders deliberately summon the spirits of the afflicted through music and incense during the public gathering. Once summoned, they may ask the zar spirits to fulfill their

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\(^{16}\)Battain reports that different means of divination are used, according to the identity of the spirit. For example, in the case of the Turkish spirit Rokosh, cards will be used while in the case of Christian masters, coffee cup reading is preferred (1993:110).
demands (Kennedy 1978). Once the possessing spirits are identified, then preparation for zar reconciliation rites may begin. However, in many cases, I have observed that the reconciliation ceremonies did not take place immediately. There are many other social and financial factors that contribute to one’s decision to undergo a zar initiation.

The Hadra: the Public Face of Zar

The musical part of the ritual is regularly performed in a weekly gathering, the hadra (presence), which is a public event held in the home of a zar leader. The hadra is often located near a visitation shrine.\(^{17}\) Quite often, attending the hadra takes place in association with devotion to the local saint. This may involve visitation to the saint’s shrine before the public zar.\(^{18}\) For the initiated, the act of attending the weekly hadra may also be referred to as tazkera (reminder), a token of the bond between the initiated host and possessing spirits. The purpose of this gathering is for old and new devotees to go into trance, dancing to the tunes specific to one’s spirits. The zar spirits love their music and appear when their specific tunes are played.

The hadra attracts old initiates who were unable to finance their yearly zar ceremony, novices who are assessing zar as a healing option, serious cult devotees

\(^{17}\)By the end of the nineteenth century, the Egyptian state had specifically outlawed the use of shrines for zar purposes (De Jong 1978). However, the hadra of zar are still associated with specific saints’ shrines in Cairo and elsewhere in Egypt (cf. Fakhouri 1968). One can safely assume a strong link between the saint shrine cults and zar (Natvig 1991).

\(^{18}\)This feature clearly distinguishes the Egyptian zar from the Ethiopian one (Messing 1958; Leiris 1958). It might further our understanding to compare zar with other spirit possession cults in North Africa, such as the Hamadsha and the Gnawa brotherhoods. These are Moroccan confreres associated with saints’ shrines. Dols, who took the Ethiopian variant as his model, mistakenly distinguishes between spirit possession in the Egyptian zar and the Hamadsha on the basis that only the latter is associated with saints’ shrines (1992:296). It is interesting to note that certain spirits figure in both pantheons. For example, Aisha Qandisha, the central saintly spirit of the Hamadsha, is known as Aisha El Maghribiya in the Egyptian zar pantheon. Moreover, some of the music performed by Gnawa in Morocco is identical in form to zar music I heard in Schag in Upper Egypt (Crapanzano 1973; Paques 1964).
who attend regularly, and curious observers. It is in a hadra that the uninitiated
participant expects confirmation of her possession with zar through her response to the
tunes.

Rites of Placation and Reconciliation

The initiatory rites of the zar are referred to in a variety of terms. They are called
‘edwa (feast), tazkera (reminder) in the case of the already initiated, or madyafa
(hosting) if the sacrificial animal is a goat or a larger animal. The most common
terms, however, are solha (reconciliation), or ‘aqd (contract), and midaan (dance floor).
Unlike other possessing spirits in Egypt, the zar spirits cannot be exorcized. When the
masters possess someone and reveal their identity, they can only be reconciled to their
host, and thus aid rather than torment him or her, if he or she becomes a cult member
and undergoes its rituals.

The zar initiation ceremony is a devotional act and an acknowledgment of the
power, derived from the God of Islam, of all the masters represented in a particular
cult. The goal of the ceremony is to acknowledge the spirits responsible for an initiand’s
affliction. This is to nullify the affliction and mobilize the positive force of possession.
The masters in question are then placated on behalf of the possessed person by
means of sacrifice, offerings, and rituals and/or dance to win their forgiveness
(is-samah) and contentment (ir-reda).

As a whole, the ceremony celebrates a permanent bond between the initiate
and her possessing spirits, for whom the animals are sacrificed (Natvig 1987). The rite
is described as a marriage between the initiate and one of her masters. The satisfied masters protect their host, open her way, bring her prosperity, and may eventually enable her to divine through dreams, visions, coffee cup reading and cards.

_Zar_ initiation and its reaffirmation is carried out via a set of reconciliation rites. Offerings to the _zarjinn_ in exchange for healing and well-being are the essential component of this ritual complex. These offerings include incense, spirit paraphernalia, and blood sacrifice. Each sacrificial animal is associated by color to a specific spirit. The expressed purpose of these rites is to fulfill the specific demands (_talabat_) of the spirits, and to initiate the afflicted into a community of _zar_ participants. This is achieved through a solidarity rite called _‘akkam_ (literally, in a bundle, one in all) in which the sacrificial animals are consumed in unison by the initiand and her initiated guests.

These demands include special incense, candles, costumes, jewelry and sacrificial animals; these serve as signs of identification and association with the afflicting spirits and play an important symbolic role. The _zar_ initiation constitutes a contract (_‘aqd_) between the afflicted and her possessing spirits. In principle, the initiate provides annual offerings to her _zars_, and the _zars_ respond by ensuring the initiate’s prosperity and well-being.

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19 The marriage between master and host implies the former’s exclusive right over the latter (see also Natvig 1988:58-61). This exclusivity is particularly apparent in the case of cult mistresses; or when a master falls in love with a human host (Fakhouri 1968:55; El-Shamy 1980:178) and in the taboo on physical closeness during the first week following initiation. A traditional cult mistress has to be devoted to her master, who demands sexual exclusivity. This entails the engineering of her own divorce or separation from her husband, attributed to the will of the masters (Constantinides 1985:590). A _zar_ initiate cannot kiss or hug anyone or sleep in the same room with her husband during the week following her reconciliation ceremony, lest this action angers the masters (for a different interpretation of _zar_ marriage, see Boddy 1989).
These offerings are made to zars in exchange for the healing of the initiate from the affliction, which they had previously caused. No one may participate in consumption of the meat of the sacrificial animal except the person who is undergoing initiation and others in the group who has already passed through the initiation process. Thus, the consumption of the sacrifice is the symbolic expression of a bond; the affliction or burden (himi) of the initiand is distributed and shared by those who eat the sacrificial meal. The blood of the sacrificial animals anointing the body of the possessed initiand binds her to her zars. The initiate for the rest of her life wears the zar amuletic jewelry that has been anointed in the sacrificial blood.

**Characteristics of Zar Rituals**

*Zar* rituals are extremely malleable. *Zar* ritual structure provides scaffolding for a wide range of ritual elements. For example, the use of odd numbers—one, three, five, or seven—structures not only ritual durations but also spirit manifestations and numbers of spirits in different pantheons. The structure of the ritual and its elements is essentially modular. The duration of the ceremony may be expanded or collapsed to fit the financial and circumstances of the individual devotee and her reasons for undergoing initiation.

Earlier in the century, and possibly as late as the 1960s in Cairo, zar initiation occupied up to seven days and nights. The seventh day would be marked by another rite ending the ritual seclusion of the initiate. In this ceremony, a specific part of the skulls of the sacrificed animals is ritually disposed of in the Nile River. The most common form of this event now occupies an entire evening and a day. This celebration
begins after sunset and continues on the following day. This event marks the beginning of a seven day ritual. The initiate then undergoes a period of seclusion and liminality where she only eats from her sacrificial animals. From the beginning of the ritual on the evening of the first day until the termination of the rite, she is said to be with her spirits (ma'al-asyad). During this period she is to abstain from sex with her husband and any signs of exchange of affection with both men and women.

Sometimes the seven-day period of liminality is reduced to three or five days to fit with the initiand’s schedule. She may then by herself perform a simple rite to end her seclusion and reconcile with her angry spirits. This rite is called safi ya laban (as clear as milk). On some occasions, the initiand may choose to join the hadra or have a special zar ceremony performed on a boat in the Nile called zar il-bahr (the river) to ritually mark the end of her seclusion and perform a rite to dispose of the bones of the sacrificial animals. In all cases, milk products such as rice pudding or yogurt are then used as offerings. The whiteness of the milk signifies a clean slate, the end of the spirit anger.

**Types of Zar Rituals**

Cairo zar rituals are classified by ritual specialists in two major ways: with or without music and song. The first type of zar is a private ritual called ‘as-sakt, which literally means ‘in silence,’ referring to the absence of music. Zar with music is called drummed (daq) zar.
The Silent Zar

The silent form is much more commonly used than zars with music, because it costs much less and is more private. For example, men and unmarried girls in some neighborhoods often placate their spirits through this form so that their association with the zar is not made public. Many zar devotees choose to follow this route. They go after their sacrificial rite to the weekly public gathering to cut down on expenses. Joining a hadra gathering occurs on the same day or on the following day of the sacrifice.

The silent zar is the essential ritual module which is limited to the fulfillment of zar spirit ‘demands’ part of the ritual complex. These offerings are made to placate the angry spirit(s) that caused the present affliction. The offering rite has two components: the setting of an offering table (kursi) and the performance of a ritual sacrifice (debiṭ). The offering table is set on the evening before the sacrificial rite with the favorite placated spirit(s). As in other life cycle rituals in Egypt, henna and procession candles play a major role. The offering includes special food, symbolic objects, items of clothing, and colored candles. During the sacrificial rite, the blood of the immolated animal is gathered in a plate. The blood is then used by the ritual leader to anoint specific parts of the initiand’s body. The initiand’s zar jewelry is dipped in the same plate and then worn by the initiand. More attention is given to parts of the body symptomatic of spirit affliction. That is, if the angry spirit or spirits have afflicted a particular part of the body, that part will be massaged several times with the sacrificial blood. The anointing of the initiand’s body and her jewelry establishes or reconfirms the pact (‘ahd) and contract (‘aqd) between the possessed
and her masters. An adept who has undergone this process is referred to as
metzafarla (anointed with the blood of sacrificial animals).

The sacrificed animal is then cooked and ritually consumed. The silent zar is
usually officiated by a zar leader or by the experienced initiand herself in the
initiand’s own residence; in both cases an additional ritual module is added. Special
ritual attention is given to specific areas of the initiand’s home, particularly to the zar
spirits that reside in the bathroom and those of the doorway. Sacrificial blood is
poured in the latrine as an offering to its spirits. And the threshold of the residence or
her bedroom is also anointed with blood.

The Drummed Zar

The musical zar is characterized by the presence of professional musicians
who specialize in a variety of zar ritual singing. Zar ritual singing entices the
manifestation of spirits on the bodies of the dancing devotees, mainly through
possession trances. Zar spirits are invisible; however, during possession dances
they take hold of the dancers’ bodies and become visible. Onlookers recognize the
trancers’ change of facial expression as that of the zars. Zar music is performed in
two ritual arenas: in the hadra, or weekly gathering, and in zar initiation ceremonies.

The first arena is a weekly gathering hosted in the home of a zar ritual leader
(sheikh, sheikha). While sometimes zar initiations are hosted in the hadra, the
weekly ritual activities are limited to the musical part of spirit placation. In the hadra,
possession dances are mainly intended to temporarily appease the spirits of those
who are not yet ready for the commitment or expenses of a zar initiation with music
or to identify the afflicting spirits of novices. The second arena where zar music is performed is in initiation ceremonies, which are sometimes referred to as farah il-zar (zar celebration).

The description that follows is about the musical form of zar, referred to below simply as zar.

9. Zar Music and Dance

Musical Troupes

Until the 1940s, each zar pantheon was associated with different zar musical troupes who played different styles of music and instruments. This zar specialization reflected different ethnic histories, local variations, and perhaps even different belief systems. This specialization has now broken down. Over the last 50 years or so, there has been mixing of musical styles and pantheons, particularly for the most popular zar spirits. There has also been consolidation of zar musicians of disparate groups through marriage or business interests. Some spirits and musical groups totally disappeared;^{20} however, their most popular spirits with their songs and rhythms were adopted by other musical groups.

Today there are three zar musical groups: the Upper Egyptian (Sa’idi), the Tambura or Sudani, and Abul Gheit. In Cairo, the first group used to be female musicians, originally many of whom were of gypsy origin, who migrated from Upper Egypt to Cairo with their styles of music and zar beliefs. With time, they have incorporated many of the songs and traditions of other local women’s groups from

\[^{20}\text{For example, the extinct groups are the ‘afnu, the ‘arussi, and the rongo groups.}\]
Cairo.\textsuperscript{21}

The Tambura group was originally made up of migrants from the Sudan who settled in Egypt during Anglo-Egyptian rule. The Abul Gheit group originally specialized in religious saint songs; they were introduced to zar in the 1940s. During this period of mixing and consolidation there was no introduction of totally new categories of spirits. Old songs were adapted to the musical styles and rhythms of the adopting groups, producing newly synthesized songs which contained both old songs and new lyrics, and new rhythms were also included.

**Song and Dance**

*zar* music and songs bring the world of the other into the presence of the cult members. The musical repertoire of the *zar* is a collection of different music, with rhythms and tunes corresponding to the ethnicity of each spirit. Some songs are very similar to *zikr*, the dancing music and mystical poetry of the Sufi orders. If the host is possessed by a Sudanese master, she will be lured by Sudanese rhythms to dance into trance. It is this response to music that identifies the spirit. Trance dance is the existential validation of spirit possession. Onlookers identify the changes in the facial expressions of the dancers as an indication of the presence of *zar* spirits.

The songs are also vehicles for transmitting the cult knowledge: the possessed learns about her master, his paraphernalia and his personality through the lyrics of the spirit songs. This knowledge is necessary for the staging of the trance dance, in which

\textsuperscript{21} Sometimes the Upper Egyptian groups are called Masri (Cairene) because their styles and musicians have been incorporated into Upper Egyptian groups (the reverse is also true).
the adept, wearing the appropriate costumes, performs the characters of her masters. For example, the song of the spirit Salila from the Sudanese group speaks to the reoccupation of the spirit by her physical appearance and beauty. The song describes her as coming out of the public bath and combing her hair. The person possessed by Salila dances in response to her tune by enacting bathing and combing. The possessed sprinkles water on herself and her friends. Sometimes the possessed uses a hand mirror to please Salila and to enhance her own performance.

The songs are also the main vehicle for introducing new spirits to a wider audience. Once a new song becomes popular with one cult, it is disseminated into others through musicians and clients who move among congregations. A zar dies when its song is no longer played. People implicitly acknowledge that they give life to spirits by placating them. I once asked for a song that I had only read about, and the musicians said that this particular spirit had died long ago. The spirit in question had no surviving hosts anymore to bring it to life in ritual performance.

Zar ritual song performances play an important role in the reconciliation ceremonies. Songs are instruments of healing because of their potential to communicate with and mobilize the power of different groups of supernatural beings: God, the prophets, the saints and the spirits. These are literally called into action through the ritual singing of the zar. The devotees usually respond with a specific kind of dancing called tafqir, which leads to trance. Not all types of trance performed in zar are possession trances. Dancers, who experience trance in response to a song that praises the prophet Mohammad or any of the saints, are in communion.
with such supernatural beings. The spirits of those immanent beings are said to fill the room.

Spirit songs played by different bands of professional musicians in different styles often describe spirit attributes. The performance of songs may last for the duration of an evening and/or a day and involve a number of spirits from specific pantheons possessing the initiand and her guests. While zar possession is a permanent state, zar spirit songs call on each spirit to make its possession visible. The possessed devotees respond by dancing to the praised spirit tune, often moving gradually into trance as their identity merges with that of the zar spirit. The possession trance that culminates is an existential validation of the presence of the spirit on the body of the dancer. Satisfaction for both the spirit and the participants is achieved through each song performance.

10. Zar Paraphernalia

Zar paraphernalia consists of amulets and jewelry, costumes and other props corresponding to a spirit or group of spirits. These items are considered part of the demands (talabat) of the masters for reconciliation. These help to dramatize the enactment of the other, as costumes enhance the character role in theater.22 In the public hadra, some cult leaders provide generic costumes for spirits that only a few clients use. For example, a red fez and a sash for the Ottoman spirit Yawra Bey, or a black head dress with golden crosses for the Christian spirit.

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In the private zar, the bride-to-be buys dresses, shawls and scarves for her reconciliation with her masters, guided by her strong desires, dreams and visions. Quite often, items from this zar trousseau are worn every time the possessed attends private or public zar ceremonies. The zar participant wears special amulets and jewelry that are anointed in the blood of sacrifice at each reconciliation ceremony.

One of the common types of zar amulets comes in a tablet form or as a framed glass heart. I have also seen newer specimens made of plastic and older ones made of semi-precious stones such as carnelian. Both types of amulet are referred to as heart (qalb); they and are worn as pendants throughout the life of the adept.

Most of the circular tablets are inscribed on at least one side with a verse from The Koran\textsuperscript{23} or other Islamic formulaic invocations.\textsuperscript{24} Some other tablets correspond to specific masters. These may be abstract or anthropomorphic representations of a specific spirit. Even when a cult member drops out, the anointed amulets that she has

\textsuperscript{23}Ayet al Kursi (The Throne), verse 255 from The Cow Sura (Al Baqara). It reads as follows:
GOD: There is no God but He,  
the living, eternal, self-sustaining.  
Neither does somnolence affect Him nor sleep.  
To Him belongs all that is in the heaven and the earth;  
and who can intercede with Him except by His leave?  
known to Him is all that is present before men  
and what is hidden (in time past and future),  
and not even a little of His knowledge can they grasp  
except what He will.  
His seat extends over heavens and the earth,  
and He tires not protecting them;  
He alone is all high and supreme (Ali, trans. 1992:44)

\textsuperscript{24}For example, "Oh God, Your Mercy," "There is no God but Allah, Oh Loving One (wadud), preserve the newborn," "In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate."
accumulated throughout her life as a zar devotee are preferably kept until her death so that the assyad are not offended.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4.png}
\caption{Illustration 4. An old heart amulet from Lower Egypt}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{25}See also Kriss & Kriss 1962; Schinerl 1980; Bachinger & Schienerl 1984; Kruk 1993 on zar amulets and jewelry.
Illustration 5. A new heart amulet used in Cairo and Upper Egypt
11. Conclusion

The transnational and hybrid nature of zar and its capacity to incorporate and absorb new meaningful elements, to reflect changes in the wider Egyptian society and to adjust to global forces, is one of its basic characteristics. Zar is a dynamic system understood, interpreted, and performed with infinite possibilities. Zar can be construed as a ‘bricolage’ (Levi-Strauss 1966; Comaroff 1985; Boddy 1989) of signs and symbols that are continuously tailored to fit the needs of its participants and tinkered to create meaning in response to local and global forces.
CHAPTER IV

THE ZAR TRADE: BELONGING TO TAYFET AL-ZAR

1. Introduction

Although the emergence of zar spirit possession in Egypt during the nineteenth century is associated with slavery, rapid social change, and the continuous migration of people to and within Egypt, zar is not usually thought of as a transnational phenomenon relevant to global processes. In his book, “Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization” (1996), anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has persuasively linked what he calls ‘the production of locality’ and ritual practices to the cultural challenges posed by globalization.

I find Appadurai’s concepts of ‘locality’ and ‘neighborhood’ useful for understanding participation in zar and its relationship to female connectivity and women’s world view. Belonging to a zar network in a particular place lies at the heart of community-building. Zar participants and adepts form congregations within and across communities in particular hadras. The relationship between members of any zar cult congregation is characterized by its potential for close-knittedness. For example, a newcomer into a place may be immediately absorbed into local existing social networks of people by attending any zar hadra anywhere in Egypt.

According to Appadurai, ‘Locality’ is a complex relational and contextual quality which "is constituted by a series of links between the sense of social
immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts." This complex quality expresses itself in a certain kind of agency, sociability, and reproducibility.

'Neighborhood' refers to the existing social forms in which 'locality' is realized as value. Here 'neighborhood' is a situated community characterized by its actual spatial or virtual attributes and its potential for social reproduction (1996:178-9). Appadurai writes: "The long-term reproduction of a neighborhood that is simultaneously practical, valued, and taken-for-granted depends on the seamless interaction of localized spaces and times with local subjects possessed of the local knowledge to reproduce locality" (1996:181).

Appadurai argues that rites of passage such as zar are about the production of local subjects: actors who are members of a situated community of kin, friends, neighbors or enemies. Ceremonies and rituals are complex social techniques inscribing 'locality' onto bodies. They are ways to embody locality and to locate bodies in socially and spatially defined communities.

'Locality' is also materially produced. The building of a house, the making and re-making of fields for agricultural purposes, the celebration of a ritual, among other things, are techniques for the spatial production of locality and are "moments in a general technology (and teleology) of localization" (1996:179-180). Zar rituals socialize space in Cairo and ground the devotees in its landscape by routinely celebrating zar in its river and its cemeteries.

Following Appadurai's insights about the relationship of rituals to 'locality' and the latter's relationship to 'neighborhood,' I maintain that zar can be viewed as a
technology of sociability and localization. Zar localizes bodies in time and space. It marks the passing of time and of hard times. Zar also produces a certain type of sociability and interconnectivity. For me a 'neighborhood' means a community of interconnected people associated with a particular social space. Zar rites and rituals produce particular subjectivities by localizing and orienting bodies, especially those of women, in space and time. This local subjectivity may be understood as a 'structure of feeling' (1996:182) and as a sense of belonging which is an embodied attachment to particular localities and/or groups of people. This sense of belonging is mobilized, maintained and modified through time (Lovell 1998:4).

I see this 'structure of feeling' and this 'sense of belonging' as an embodied state of being and as an orientation in the world produced by repetitive habitual actions and routine interactions between people in a particular landscape and around a particular cult leader and diviner. One can say that this feeling of belonging is a sense of social connection that is centered on interest in zar and on the relationship to a particular zar leader and the gathering of people around him or her.

A stranger, afflicted, lonely or alienated, a person who comes to a particular zar gathering for the first time, is taken in by the group. At many of the zar congregations where I happened to be present, I saw countless women who arrived at a hadra as strangers, but who left having told their story and received empathy and support. A zar hadra is one of the public arenas available to women to socialize and participate in a social network beyond kin and neighbors.

In the following chapters, I examine the socialization and the localization of space and time in the zar ritual through complex and deliberate practices of ritual
performance, representation, and actions. Throughout those three chapters, I will focus on the ways that zar rituals and knowledge localize duration and extension. I will examine the ways in which this zar ritual complex gives this duration and extension names and properties, values and meanings, symptoms and legibility (Appadurai 1996:110), by enacting meaning that is already shared within situated communities (Rappaport 1999). I also describe and discuss the different ways by which zar rituals socialize certain places, and in the process, ground initiates into the landscape of Cairo. In any given moment of crisis in a person’s life, this zar symbolic structure provides an arena for female connectivity and facilitates the building of communal and economic networks among participants, clients, and professionals alike and their respective communities. These networks consist of people who share different interests in zar. They are found within the old quarters of Cairo, around cult leaders, in weekly gatherings (hadras) as they are also cultivated among zar musicians and other zar professionals such as the silversmiths and goldsmiths, the local butchers, as well as incense and candle specialists.

2. Historiographical Studies of Women in Cairo

Despite the fact that women played an active role within society in city quarters in the nineteenth century (Cole 1993; Tucker 1986), until this present work, very few scholars have focused on the nature and the organization of zar as a key to understanding women’s everyday political and social role in Cairo. The focus on women in Middle Eastern studies is a very recent development and is a response to feminist pressure in the academy (Nelson 1991; Kandiyoti 1996). Only a handful of
scholars have done research on women in Cairo (see for example, among
anthropologists, Nadim el-Messiri 1975; Rugh 1979; Early 1993; Wikan 1980, 1996;
and among historians Tucker 1985; el-Sayed Marsot 1995). Few have focused on
women’s everyday politics and networks (Singerman 1994; Hoodfar 1997), and none
have reached the sophisticated level of analysis with which Abu Lughod treats
women’s everyday politics and expressive culture among the Awlad Ali bedouins in
Northern Egypt (1986).

In the present chapter I discuss the ways in which zar musicians, and their
leaders, as well as the initiates who learn to use zar knowledge for divination
purposes, view themselves as a community and as a tayfa (a guild corporation). I
suggest that for zar symbolic and ritual structure needs to be understood on its own
terms; it needs to be analyzed within its own environmental, social, and historical
contexts and conditions. I argue that zar initiations and their progressive phases
reflect stages in zar knowledge acquisition very similar to those professional stages
used in the guild corporation’s apprenticeships in Egypt. The culmination of zar guild
initiations produces professional diviners who in turn serve the interest of the group.
Professional diviners recruit new potential initiates. As graduates of zar, the diviners
help expand the social and economic sphere of zar. It is through continuous zar
initiations that zar ‘locality’ is produced, inscribed on bodies, and the sense of
belonging to a zar is realized as value (Appadurai 1996; Lovell 1998). Participating
in zar rituals over time, adopting its world view and accumulating its knowledge
facilitate the orientation of people in Cairo as it grounds them in time and space.
By examining the ethnohistory of zar in Cairo and the stages and complexities of its rituals, my study points out that zar cults have constituted a female guild corporation (tayfa) as far as memory can be traced. Such female guild associations have apprenticed zar initiates since the nineteenth century, and perhaps earlier, so that the initiates may be gradually incorporated into a group of professional diviners and soothsayers (Baer 1964). I will show that today this organizational structure and guild lore, while not whole or intact, still survives in many ways as it trains some of its long-term-initiates to become healers and diviners (El Hadidi 1997).

3. Zar as Guild Corporation

Zar musicians and ritual specialists view themselves as a community. As a group, they refer to themselves as tayfat-il-zar and their craft as a Kar (work). Tayfat-il-zar is a guild-like professional organization and a remnant of the way professional associations and religious orders were organized in Cairo until the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. They have special initiation ceremonies to elect their leaders and honor their patron saints. Zar musicians and diviners are a close-knit group of men and women with a particular hierarchy organized around zar work. They have different roles and responsibilities. At the top of tayfat-il-zar hierarchy are sheikhs, or ritual leaders, and their assistants. These are ritual specialists who have undergone the initiation trajectory of zar and have been chosen by their spirits to become zar healers and diviners. They sell their services as masters of ceremony, oversee the initiations of other zar devotees, organize contracts with musicians, perform the necessary rituals, and are sought for
divination purposes. The hierarchy of the *tayfa* also includes musical bandleaders and *shaghaleen* (workers).

The musicians are organized mostly by gender into musical bands, each of which used to specialize in the performance of a distinct style of *zar* music. As mentioned before, today there are only three types of *zar* bands in Cairo: the Upper Egyptian, the Tambura or Sudani, and the Gheitaniya.

The Upper Egyptian (*sa'idi*) is usually an all-woman band that sings in a distinctive style. The band consists of a lead singer (*rayessa*) and three to five musicians who also act as a chorus. There is only one *darabuka* or *tabla* (dum bek drum) player, whereas the rest of the band members, including the lead singer, play the *duf* (frame drum). There are also few male lead singers who formed Upper Egyptian bands with the help of one or two female chorus.

Illustration 6. Upper Egyptian *Zar* Band
The Tambura band is of mixed gender and is lead by a *sandjak* (leader) who plays the *tambura* (a five-stringed large African lyre) and is assisted by two women drummers and one or two percussionist dancers, who are usually males. The patron saint of the Tambura bands is Sidi Bilal, the African companion of the Prophet and the first muezzin in Islam.
Illustration 8. Sangak Ouf the Tambura leader
69. Tambura dancer enticing devotees to dance

Illustration 10. Ibrahim the Tambura dancer
The Gheitanya, the followers of the saint Hassan Abul Gheit, form all-male bands. In the last twenty years there have been new trends affecting this traditional typology due to the limited number of female musicians; some cannot find sufficient members to form a band and therefore join male bands.

Illustration 11. Rayess Othman, the Gheitaniya leader and myself

In 2005, with the help of Sheikha Karima, Anhar's daughter and heir, we counted around two hundred zar musicians in Cairo and its vicinities. Many musicians, particularly women, were already retired due to old age or because they lost their band leaders or their sheikhs. There were only around 15 female musicians still practicing and about approximately a hundred and eighty men who are mostly Gheitaniya musicians and singers.
Tayfat-il-zar is not an endogamous community but they have high rate of intermarriage. While the career of a zar musician begins with an apprenticeship at a very young age and is mostly inherited from parents or close relatives, the career of a leader depends on the person's degree of involvement with zar and his or her life circumstances.

Members of this community know each other by name, have common work-related memories, and often have reciprocal ritual exchanges and obligations during marriages, birthings, funerals, and sickness. They share a special linguistic code or seem that enables them to communicate amongst themselves without being understood by their customers. For example, the seem code word werish, "a novice," is used to indicate the ignorance of a person attending a zar performance of the ways of zar. This would necessitate special attention on the part of the musician towards the novice. Such focus intention is to grab the novice's attention and interest to the dance arena. In such a case, the musicians would intentionally play very luring beats or rhythms until the novice's resistance breaks down and he or she joins the dance floor. Another important word is ame which means "give it up" or "let it slide." It is mostly used with reference to giving up contentious issues to avoid conflict between the tayfa and their customers, especially during performance. This particular code (seem) is also used by members of what is left of the guild of pickpockets (nashaleen).

4. Historical Roots of Zar and Guild Incorporation Rituals

A large number of the zar musicians are of black slave descent, not only in Egypt but all over the Middle East (see for example, al-Tayash 1988; Moamar 1988;
Elyas 1977; Safa 1988). Tremearne (1914) observed some of these black slave associations at work in Libya in the early twentieth century. These were bori (a Hausa and North African spirit possession variant) musicians and devotees who provided shelter and employment to newcomers, ex-slaves and their descendants, many of whom had experienced slavery in their lifetime. Temeame's main informants had been traveling between Egypt, North Africa or Hausa-land in Nigeria, working as bori musicians.

Members of the tayfa and some of the older devotees I interviewed during fieldwork remember the existence of certain spirit houses in the Medina (Gamaliya and El Darb Al Ahmar neighborhoods) run by ex-slave women. In one such case, the house was named after the spirit Yawra (Beit Yawra). Yawra is the most popular zar spirit in Cairo. The spirit is a representation of an Ottoman officer dressed in full officer regalia and a red fez. Yawra seduces young girls and prevents them from marrying.

Slavery and Slave Associations

Zar and other spirit possession activities in the Nile valley and North Africa have continued to provide a focus and a rationale for groups to associate for different and multiple purposes at different times for a variety of people. Black slaves and their descendants (Tremearne 1914; Natvig 1987; Makris 1996; Paques 1991), women in multiple generations, and gay men (Al-Adly 1984) have formed associations. These include zar musician groups, zar devotional networks within
neighborhoods, and zar congregations in hadras at least since the nineteenth century in Cairo (Natvig 1987; 1991).

I suggest that women produced zar groups parallel to the Sufi brotherhoods and to guild-like musicians' associations (turuq, tawa'if), which acted as a buffer for women and black slaves who needed social and economic support before and after the end of slavery in the late nineteenth century.

Spirit possession associations share some of the general principles and organizational features with the Egyptian guilds (Baer 1964; Raymond1974), Sufi organizations (Moriah 1963) and the neighborhood associations of the nineteenth century in which most of the urban population in Egypt participated (Cole 1993; Tucker 1986; Toledano 1990). Only the rituals of incorporation of zar associations (tayfa) have survived into the twenty first century without being absorbed or fully obliterated by the Egyptian state, as occurred with other nineteenth century popular guilds (Chalcraft 2004; Ghazaleh 1999). While certain trades still use the word tayfa to refer to their kind—such as those of the building trades (me'mar) or cabbies ('arbagiya)—none to my knowledge have rituals of incorporation. That is not to say that zar has not suffered many blows in the Egyptian state’s attempts to control its population and its associations or that it has not changed; it has, in fact, gradually decreased in popularity since the nineteenth century. One such attempt was the decree making it illegal to practice zar in Muslim shrines under the influence of the Sufi orders (turuq). This move was part of the state plan for the reorganization and control of popular Islam, and trade and Sufi guilds (tawa'if) at the end of the nineteenth century (De Jong 1978).
Egyptian Guilds after Baer and Zar as Tayfa

Gabriel Baer provides an ideal pattern of the structure of the guilds in the nineteenth century based on the Gotha document dating back to the end of the 16th or early 17th century (1964:48). Baer argues that by the nineteenth century the model he constructed based on his reading of the document had suffered decline. The guild structures were no longer intact (1964:57). In the 17th century, there were four stages or gates (ablawa) expressed in formal ceremonies for mastering a trade or a craft. However, by the nineteenth century, according to Baer, it seems that these stages were limited to only three degrees of qualifications: apprentice, journeyman, and master of the trade.

In zar, there are three stages or types of initiation grades: novices (werish), hosting (diyafa), and finally the girding ceremony (al-hizam) through which the status of master of the zar art of divination is acknowledged by the wider community.

According to Baer, the ritual called iltham (incorporation) marking the first stage was no longer practiced in Egypt during the nineteenth century (1964:59). The second stage, called ‘ahd (pact), became the first stage in the nineteenth century. Here the apprentice or the seeker makes a covenant or a contract with his or her teacher, which is sealed by the recitation of Fatiha (the Opening Surah of the Koran). This rite was sometimes accompanied by a feast (1964:50). In zar, the initiation ceremonies in the first two stages done for novices or for hosting are referred to by the same name: ‘ahd or covenant. The agreement between humans and spirits is also sealed by the recitation of the Opening Surah. The ceremony, just like the second stage of guild incorporation, is often accompanied by a feast in which

91
sacrificial animals are consumed communally and distributed to the wider community according to Islamic principles. That is, one third of the sacrificial animal to the person and his group, another third to those who are close (aqraboon), and, most importantly, the final third to the needy—the poor, travelers, widows, orphans etc.

According to Baer, in the Egyptian guild system prior to the nineteenth century, the third stage of incorporation is when the apprentice becomes a journeyman. Here the candidate formally joins the guild and becomes a full member. This stage of the initiation is called shadd (binding) or the hizam or tahzeem (girding) or ‘akd (contract). In the hizam or shadd ceremony, the waist of the candidate is girded and a certain number of knots are ritually tied and untied. This initiation was also accompanied by a feast and involved the newly declared craftsman ritually offering presents or payment to different members of the guild hierarchy. The candidate must ask the assembly to accept him into the guild (1964:51). The fourth stage is where the guild member was promoted from a journeyman to a master (mu’allim, usta). This ceremony was called idhn or ijaza, which is a license to practice the craft or trade on one’s own (1964:52).

In zar, the ceremony that licenses the cult member to become a diviner is also called girding (hizam or tahzeem). Here the initiand become a sheikh or a sheikha (leader). This final stage of the zar trajectory involves an elaborate set of rites that includes the sacrifice and the distribution of several animals (mostly sheep) and the public ritual acknowledgment of the group of the mastery or mashyakha of the initiand. The initiand is asked to name the ‘master of her head’ and the ‘master of her household’. She also has to name the slaves of the above mentioned spirits as a

92
sign of mastering the secret of the zar trade. It also involves the anointing of the tools and symbols of the zar divination trade with the blood of the sacrificial animals. These include the incense burner, several boxes of incense and the girdle itself. The initiand also offers the zar leader a comforter in the color associated with his or her spirit. Each musician also receives a garment as a gift from the new sheikh or sheikha signifying patronage.

5. The Stories of Professional Zar Diviners

This section is about the professional aspect of zar divination and how even today zar still exhibits remnants of the functions of a guild corporation. Zar ritual stages, as we have seen, exhibit remnants of the forms and functions of guild corporations. Zar rituals apprentice initiates into zar divination or soothsaying. The following case studies were collected during field work in Cairo. They are stories of women who became professional diviners by progressing through the zar initiation trajectory. Each has a different market niche. The first is the story of Sheikha Suad who is said to divine for the princes of Saudi Arabia and earns a great deal of money in the process. Consequently, she is able to give gifts to the sheikha and the musicians who initiated her. The second story is about Sheikha Karima who works from her home in the Gammaliya neighborhood in Fatimid Cairo. Sheikha Karima is not connected to any particular zar group, rather her business interest is with the silversmiths in the jewelry market, which is not far away from her home. The third story is that of Om Mohammad, who divines for her neighbors and people in her neighborhood for a small fee. While she sometimes attended the zar weekly.

26 An earlier version of this section has already been discussed (El Hadidi 1997).
gathering in Abul Saoud, the sheikha El Gariya considered her a competitor who steals away customers of the *hadra*. The common feature in the lives of these three women is that they all overcame serious illness with the help of *zar*, and they continued in their initiatory trajectory until they became *zar* leaders themselves. They have taken *zar* interest and apprenticeship a step further by earning a living through *zar* knowledge.

**The Story of Sheikha Suad**

When I was leaving Cairo in August 1996 to come back to the United States, I went to visit Anhar and her daughter Karima, the *zar* leaders, to bid them farewell. They invited me for lunch. The last week before I traveled back to the United States had been intense. I saw Anhar almost every day, during which she groomed me continuously in the ways of *zar*. The following conversation was her last lesson explaining how Suad became a *zar* professional. Despite the fact that Sheikha Suad has not contacted Anhar or her daughter Karima for the last 12 years, her *zar* success story is continuously retold among Anhar’s musicians. In my view the retelling of the story is partly to entice other devotees to become *zar* leaders through the example of the successful career of Suad. The story contains the ideal of giving back to the *tayfa* because its members are the source of Suad’s success. The dialogue that follows is based on a translation of the transcription of the conversation that took place.

Anhar: Sincerity (*ikhlas*) is what counts. If you see a vision (*ro'ya*) it has to come true. I have a client whose name is Suad. She was locked
up in the asylum. She told them: “take me to someone called Hagga Anhar. Her face is round and she wears wide earrings."

She was crazy, just out of the asylum, [really] mad. This is happened long time ago. At the time, the contract cost seven pounds [then approximately US$ 11], I have worked since the cheap days when it [the zar] was for five piasters [then approximately US$ .08].

Karima: This happened thirty years ago.

A: After that, they [Suad and her sister] told me: "she has just left the asylum and she has only this much [money], what should we do?" I told them: "I am at her disposal; we will do it [the private zar] anyway." I did it and she became well. It turns out that she had one [zar master] called Gado that she divines with (betbayan bi) for the princes.

K: The one of the latrine (kabaneh). [They sing a few lines of Gado's song.] He is from Nigeria.

A: As it turns out that this Gado had made her crazy and had her sent to the asylum. Djado, his name is Djado. When he made her crazy, she came out of the asylum and said, "I have seen [through a vision] a Sheikha so and so [referring to Anhar]." By the Great three times--she did not know me and I did not know her, just like what happened with you. One day, I found her coming into the hadra—the one I had first in Bab El Khalk [neighborhood].

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27Djado is the Saudi pronunciation of Gado.
And this one [Suad] entered. I started singing (ageeb) and singing [the zar song] until Gado . . . . She stood up, danced into trance (faqaret), and was happy. She ran to the latrine and danced into trance inside the latrine.

A: God fixed her situation and she got married. Where do you think she stayed?

Author: Where?

A: In the capital of Saudi Arabia, in Riyadh. She stayed in Riyadh. She married a good man. And then one day, I found her with him, here in my place.

Author: Her husband is Saudi?

A: Yes. She stayed in Dokki [neighborhood], that is, the period of her stay. And she told me the moment she saw the black billygoat that she wanted in the Madbah.28 "Oh Mother--let us go and get the stuff [for the zar]," The goat had long soft hair and horns. She asked the man how much it was. He told her it was a LE 150. She told him, "No, it's LE 200." I could not say anything lest I interfere in his rizq (sustenance, God's blessing, and earnings). We got Fathi [Anhar's son] and took the billygoat to my house. And after that, we ran to Imbaba [the district of Cairo where the camel market used to be located]. She saw a camel. Because I cared about her [I wanted to save her money], I told her: "This one is

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28 The madbah is the neighborhood surrounding the old main slaughterhouse for Cairo. Many butchers and urban animal breeders live there. Their dwellings have courtyards and animal pens.
pretty. Get this one; it's small and we'll be able to get it into my	house and you will be able to dance into trance with it (*tefaqari
bi*)." She said, "No, I want this one." I don't know how much it was,
around LE 300, and she bought it. She said, "Let's go to the
Madbah to leave the animals in a pen for the night so that they
are all together." Or where would we put them? We'll have to
leave them in an animal pen somewhere else overnight.

And after that, we went to get a calf. Again she chose the largest
calf--oh my daughter. She has nobody that comes with her, no
relatives and nobody. Her sister--the one that came with her the
first time--had died the poor thing. She attended her second *zar*
but the third *zar*--may it [death] be far away from you--her sister
died. The important thing is she got the billy goat, the calf and the
camel.

Author: All [those sacrificial animals] for one *zar* evening celebration!?

A: Yes, for one evening. And we went to find a place for the animals.

My son was still alive--may God have mercy on him. I asked him
to find us a place to keep the animals overnight and see how
much [money] they wanted.

The important thing, I saw her going out and coming back with a
young man called Kamal from il-Sayedah Zeinab [a neighborhood].
He is related to her somehow. She got the rabbits. There was an
empty room in this house, and we put them there overnight. The
rabbits had a litter--I don't know how many. This is kheir [blessing] and this is also rizq (sustenance, God's blessing). The rabbit of Gado and his wife had a litter.

Author: But, but this way, she had her contract (it'aqadlaha) with everything [all the masters] at the same time. And the camel! That means that she became a sheikha (a zar leader).

K and A: We told you she divines (betbayer) through Gado.

K: And you know when she comes back here--prayers to the Prophet, may you become like her, may God pray on the Prophet.

A: This Osman of the zar got a gold ring.

K: And the Hagga [Anhar] got one gold bullion?

A: A watch and a galabiya [robe] for everyone.

Author: This means that she divines!

K: And she says this [prosperity] is from the money of the masters.

Author: This is from the money of the masters.

K: And she says: "Oh mother, I gave you these gifts because you are the reason for this kheir (material blessing) that came in my way."

Author: Why was she in the asylum?

K and A: She didn't know that the zar existed.

K: Her relatives had no idea about zar. And you would feel her like a mad person. She used to come to us, like this, crazy. Her state
was really a state of madness. She was married. She left her husband and came out of the hospital. And we made the zar and she became well again. She now comes [to Egypt] when God drives her.

A: O God! [let her come to Cairo]

Author: How does she bring the musicians (shaghila) to Saudi?

K: She officiates zar sacrifice without music (bitdbah ‘as-sakt).

Author: Without music. I heard that in Saudi there is zar of all sorts. And they get musicians from Morocco and all other countries. And they drum and descend [into trance].

K: When Sheikha Suad went to Saudi they told her, "Oh how we wish you would have brought il-hagga [Anhar] with you."

Commentary

The story in this dialogue between sheikha Anhar and her daughter Karima and I tells us that thirty years ago when the zar contract only cost LE 7, Suad was married to a well-to-do man. His family owned a prosperous business. When possession symptoms showed on Suad, her relatives and in-laws who did not know about zar thought she was crazy. They sent her to an asylum for the insane. Both Karima and Anhar insist that she really looked like a crazy person. After spending some time in the asylum, she had a vision of a woman with a round face and large earrings just like Anhar. Suad had never met Anhar, however. In the zar parlance the fact that she could imagine the image of Anhar before actually knowing her is taken as a sign of real possession and sincerity.
When Suad was released from the asylum, she insisted that her sister, her only living blood relative, help her search for the woman she had seen in her vision. Before performing in the Nabaweya neighborhood, Anhar used to run a hadra in Bab El Khalq neighborhood. In this old hadra, Suad finally found the woman in her vision, Anhar. The story implies that nobody told her where to find Anhar; she was just mystically drawn to the hadra. She sat in the zar room with her sister while Anhar was calling different spirits through zar songs. When the song of Gado was played, the previously unidentified master became manifest in her body. She could not control herself and danced into trance in the hadra. Then she danced into trance again in the latrine, the habitat of Gado. According to my understanding, the latrine acts as a portal that connects the human world with that of the spirits. Gado is the messengers of the spirits, the spirit of the latrine. After the culmination of her trance, Suad became elated and relaxed.

Karima and Anhar explained that Gado is a spirit of the latrine from Nigeria. Gado's tune has very pronounced African drumming. Suad's angered master Gado had made her crazy because he was not acknowledged. Suad had no money because she had just come out of the asylum. Nevertheless, Anhar accepted whatever Suad and her sister gave her to perform her reconciliation with Gado. Once the zar was done, she was very well and her life situation ameliorated. She was no longer crazy. Suad was cured and got divorced from her first Egyptian husband. She soon married a man from Saudi Arabia. The new husband was good to her. She left to live with him in Riyadh, the Saudi capital.
According to this story, Anhar initiated Suad two more times before her own sister died. By the time of her third initiation, Suad was alone in the world. In this initiation she became a sheikha (leader) of zar. Since then, she divines through Gado and sacrifices without music (in silence). Her clients are affluent people from Saudi Arabia.

A few years later she came back with her husband to Cairo for a short visit. They rented a furnished apartment in the well-to-do part of Cairo. Suad asked Anhar to accompany her so that they could buy the sacrificial animals together. Suad was very generous with the money of the masters that she earned divining through Gado. She bought gold presents for each member of the zar band, and watches and expensive clothing for everyone. This was a sign of her gratitude to Anhar and her bands who identified the 'master of her head,' Gado. Suad was so generous with her spirits that she even paid more than the price the trader asked for the black billygoat. She also picked the largest camel and the most expensive calf. She spared no expense for the masters. As a sign of the blessedness of her zar path, the sacrificial rabbits for Gado and his wife Meram, 'the master of her head,' had a litter of ten. The initiation ceremony was performed in Anhar's special zar room where the weekly gathering takes place and all the animals were sacrificed.

The Story of Sheika Karima of Gammaliya

In 1992, during the early stages of fieldwork, before I became a client of El Gariya Sono’o in Abul Saoud neighborhood, I heard a story about a woman named Karima who was possessed by the spirit of a young girl named Azuz. Sheikha Karima
was not born into a professional zar family. She became a sheikha (cult mistress) through the spirit of her head: Azuz. She could divine for various purposes, making money in the process. People who want to know about their future, need occult help making important decisions, or are suffering from suspected spirit possession symptoms pay up to LE 50 ($10) per séance for her services. For the possessed, she identifies the possessing masters and guides the neophytes into the ways of the zar. She officiates the sacrificial rites, sets the special offering table for the spirits, contracts the musicians, and other zar professionals such as the candle makers, seamstresses and fez makers and the silver and goldsmiths.

Sheikha Karima is well known to many silversmiths because she commissions a lot of zar silver jewelry for herself and for zar clients. In some cases she is considered a business partner. I was told that some of the items she commissioned cost up to LE 10,000 (then US$ 3,310).

Several times when I mentioned in the Cairo jewelers’ quarter that I was working on zar, Karima’s story was recounted to me over and over with very little variation. According to the story, Karima is covered from head to toe with silver jewelry: several necklaces, lots of bracelets, anklets as well as several earrings. She is diabetic and her possessing spirit manifested itself after she had lost her only child to a traumatic accident when he was seven years old. After the unfortunate accident, Karima became sick for a long time. Once Azuz manifested herself and was reconciled through rituals, Karima became a sheikha (cult mistress).

A few years later I had the chance to meet Sheikha Karima in the silver market. She was indeed covered in silver jewelry; some pieces were traditional zar silver
amuletic jewelry with the attached jingles, but most were modern European pieces that are readily available in the silver market, catering to the tastes of both tourists and the local middle and upper class. Karima was wearing a number of bracelets, rings, chains and necklaces as well as anklets. Wearing such a large amount of silver jewelry distinguishes Karima from other women in her neighborhood who tend to wear all the gold they own. Karima would not talk to me until I paid her a consultation fee. Her spirit Azuz turned out to be Rokoush, the daughter of Yawra. After I paid her for her divination service LE 50 ($10), Karima started calling her spirit to become manifest: “Azuz! Come on! Don’t embarrass me! What is taking you so long? Come on! Show your self.” Then she started speaking in a thin child-like voice which I thought was put on. Azuz took full possession of Karima. Now possessed she got her prayer beads out of her pocket and asked me to whisper to the beads the question that I wanted answered. Then with a pencil in her hand she drew two crossing line on a piece of paper. Then she wrote the words ‘Mohammad’ referring the Prophet of Islam and Abi Jahl his arch enemy on each side of the vertical line of the cross. She also wrote ‘Ali’ and ‘Abi Bakr’ on each side of the horizontal line. She used her prayer beads as a pendulum, moving it between the words ‘Mohammad’ and ‘Abi Djahl’ written on the scrap of paper lying on the table. Abi Djahl is Prophet Mohammad’s symbolic contrast where as the opposition between Ali, the prophet Mohamed’s cousin and Abi bakr, the first khalif in Islam goes back to a political conflict over succession after the Prophet’s death. In less than a minute the prayer beads stopped facing the word ‘Mohammad.’ Karima-Azuz congratulated me and said that my question was answered favorably and
whatever I desired will be realized. In a few seconds, Azuz was gone and Karima was speaking in her normal voice. We talked for a while and then she left.

I have not seen Karima since then. Unlike others I have seen during fieldwork, Karima did not exhibit signs of altered states of consciousness such as speaking in tongues or physical facial expressions associated with trance. She seems to me to be performing a well rehearsed act; however, her divination technique was very interesting. The prayer beads uniquely stand out compared to other zar divination techniques such as cards, coffee reading, Koranic verses or interpretation of dreams.

The Story of Om Mohammad

I met Om Mohammad when I first started attending the hadra of El Gariya in Abul Saoud neighborhood in 1993. She was with her daughter-in-law and her eight-month-old infant. We soon became acquainted, and she invited me to her home, a humble two-bedroom ground floor apartment in the Ibn Taloon neighborhood in an old part of Cairo.

Om Mohammad is poor and cannot afford extravagant zar rituals. When we met, she was then forty-eight years old, and had been a widow for ten years. Her husband had been wealthy. He had a fleet of taxis and trucks, and for the first years of their marriage, they lived a prosperous life and had four children, three boys and a girl. Then her husband suddenly became very ill and could no longer run his business. Everything he owned was gradually sold to finance the medical care for his illness. After eight years of being bedridden, he died, leaving her penniless and with four children to raise.
By the time that Om Mohammad and I met, her eldest son had married and was living in a neighboring apartment with his wife and infant. Her other son was doing his three years of army service outside of Cairo and came home occasionally. She had only two children at home. The boy was working in some trade. Her youngest daughter was fifteen and was still in school.

When Om Mohammad's husband died, she had to make ends meet. At the time, she was possessed by five masters which includes Bedouin, Turks and North African as well as local Christian zar spirits. Om Mohammad was possessed by the spirit Salma El 'arabiya and her consort El 'arabi which are the Bedouin pastoralist spirits; the spirit Rokoush which is the young Turkish girl, Abdel Salam El Asmar which is a North African saint male spirit associated with the Qadiriya Sufi order, and El Deir (the Christian monastery) which signifies a group of Christian spirits. Om Mohammad's zar spirits helped her a great deal during bad times. They made it possible for her to earn money by telling fortunes through reading coffee cups. Cup reading (irayat il-fingan) is a method or foretelling the future by interpreting the dregs that remain in a cup of coffee after it drinking it. The masters were even more helpful when she was diagnosed with diabetes and needed more money to cover the medical bills. She charges LE 2 (now approximately $.50) for a session of coffee reading where she tells her customers about their futures.

Om Mohammad had been possessed since she was six. She told me that the first time it happened she was alone in the bathroom.\textsuperscript{29} She said that because she had

\textsuperscript{29}The latrine is a standard site of possession, and an early childhood incident is part of the standard narrative formula.
been initiated several times through offering sacrifice (mitzafara)\textsuperscript{30}, she could identify the possessing spirits of her clients through reading the coffee.

She does not go frequently to the weekly gatherings because it is expensive. However, every year she performs the sacrificial rites in the privacy of her home for herself to placate her masters. As an old initiate who has gone through several zar initiations in her life, she knows what she needs to do. She does not need the help of the cult mistress. She has even helped some of her neighbors in identifying their spirits through reading the cup.

Every year in preparation for her self-initiation, she goes to the market to buy the sacrificial animals, items of clothes, and jewelry. When I asked how she identifies the demands (talaba\textsuperscript{f}) of the masters she said: "I feel when I see something that catches my attention." She also has dreams of what she has to bring to the ceremony. She performs her own sacrifice following the cult with special formulas, and anoints her own body and the zar amulets in the sacrificial blood. She then goes to the hadra the next day.

6. The Moral of the Stories

The moral of these three stories is that the ability to practice divination is the reward of sincere, generous and devoted initiates. The dramatic sicknesses marking the possession narratives of Karima, Om Mohammad and Suad can only be appreciated in contrast with their subsequent prosperity\textsuperscript{31} once they walk through the

\textsuperscript{30}mitzafara here means anointed with the blood of a sacrificial animal.

\textsuperscript{31}Despite the fact that Om Mohammed is not financially rich, she considers her self prosperous because her children are well and she can manage her life.
path of zar (tariq). Here we see that some devotees go beyond the appeasement of
their possession or affliction. Beyond healing, zar brings prosperity and opens the way
to the sincere devoted initiate. It becomes a religious enterprise and an apprenticeship
into the art of divination for some adepts.

Zar ideology promises any sincere adept the occult ability to see into the future.
Because Suad was sincere, she could see visions. Suad’s story tells us that the first
vision identified Anhar, the key to diagnosing possession and a link between the
human and the zar spirit world. Anhar was able to identify Gado by calling on him
through his zar song. Those visions are extremely important because it is through them
that an initiate is drawn to her sacrificial animal, and her items of clothing and jewelry,
as in the case of Om Mohammad and Suad. These visions are one of the ways in
which initiates experience and communicate with their possessing masters. Zar
devotees are socialized into listening to the demands of their possessing masters,
which are manifested in their own strong feelings, desires and reactions to the world
around them.

The stories of Karima, Om Mohammad and Suad tell us that they have become
sheikhas through continuous ritual devotion to their masters. In short, they have
become religious entrepreneurs and zar professionals. Through initiating a selection of
zar devotees into leadership, the cult perpetuates itself beyond the traditional and
inherited cult leadership. Each sheikha or sheikh acts as ambassador for zar interests
in her or his own community and in turn brings more work to members of tayfet il-zar.

\[32\text{Sincerity is a state of mind and a quality within the individual that goes beyond devotion to a particular master.}\]
Devotion to Gado and other masters through continuous zar initiations and generosity had made Suad very prosperous. She made a lot of money divining (tebayan) through Gado for rich Saudi families. Devotion to her zar masters has saved Om Mohammad from destitution, and has helped her develop her divinatory ability, allowing her to earn money in the process. This money is the masters' money (felus il assyad). Felus il-assyad is circulated back into the community or the tayfa: the cult professionals, leaders and musicians alike through gifts and more initiations, and into more generous offerings to the spirits and their people.

As an initiate, I was told that the master would return to me double or triple the amount of money spent for a zar ceremony. Many of the initiates had stories about miraculous return on symbolic investment in zar. In one such story, a young woman needed a lot of money to go to Saudi Arabia to buy merchandise to sell door-to-door in Cairo. A zar spirit that she mistook for a real human appeared in her life for a short time. The mysterious being gave her the money she needed then disappeared. The spirit was wearing an army officer costume, a direct indication that it was Yawra, the young girl's master spirit. Om Mohammad, who cannot afford sumptuous zar rituals, instead sacrifices every year without recourse to other zar professionals but her self. In her story, it is the masters with the help of God that provide her subsistence.

7. Conclusion

One cannot understand zar by reducing it to the functions it fulfills. When we think of zar as healing cult, a parallel to Western psychotherapy (Fakhoury 1968; El Shamy 1972; Kennedy 1978), as a mystical mode of defusing grievances between
men and women (Lewis 1967, 1971), or as muted counterhegemonic text (Boddy 1989), we are simplifying zar to fit functional rational models. To perceive zar on its own terms, and the terms by which it is practiced, means that we must take the view of the participants into account and look at the way it is experienced.

Zar above all is a mode of experience and a concept of reality which may fulfill many and multiple functions. The path of zar provides a technique for empowering and energizing adepts (particularly women) to deal with their lives by learning to listen and trust their feelings by drawing upon their intuitive and innate powers of imagination as well as a sensual experience and knowledge of the world.

I would like to argue, following Lienhardt (1961) and Kramer (1993), that zar is experienced as embodied images of passions, as in the case of Sheikha Suad’s visions of Anhar even before she met her or Om Mohammad’s desires that signify her angry spirits. Passiones is defined by Kramer as “the opposite of actions in relation to human self” (1993:58). Zar provides the sincere adept with an embodied sensuous epistemology and a moral orientation. It is an open unbounded holistic way of knowing and being in the world. The rewards of zar spiritual ways come with sincerity, and generosity. Zar masters provide their hosts with an eminent taste of the sublime unfolding from imagination. The masters are experienced, not only in symptoms of affictions, events, spaces, visions, dreams, cravings, and intuitive feelings, but also in zar music, and trance dance.

Zar experiences are varied and very personal. Each adept experiences her master in her own way and in many ways. Such experiences are drawn from the power of imagination (Wittgenstein 1979:7e). This touch of the sublime, which in zar is
recognized as nadha (mystical call), is not experienced as "mental images" but as impressions of passiones.

The zar nadha is from God and is considered as a divine touch. To understand the dimensions of this experience we need to look at what Wittgenstein wrote about imagination.

...[T]his imagination is not like a painted picture or a three-dimensional model, but a complicated structure of heterogeneous elements: words and pictures. We shall then not think of operating with written or oral signs as something to be contrasted with the operation with "mental images" of the events (1979:7e).

To make my point clearer, let us first look at the process of zar identification, the key to the healing process. Lienhardt's insight is very useful in this regards.

If the diviner is called in to diagnose the grounds of possession or sickness, it is because the patient has not himself been able to dissociate an image as the active subject of his experience from its affective accompaniments--because, from the Dinka point of view, the Power has not spoken and made itself known through the mouth of the man whom it is presumed to have attacked. The diviner's activity is here significant for an interpretation of the Powers; for it is his professional task to dissociate the grounds of suffering from the sufferer, either by himself going into a trance-like state or by inducing such a state in the sufferer or his kin or both. The diviner, that is, vicariously makes a division in the experience of suffering and suggests or discovers its image, where the patient is not able to do so (1961:152).

The cult leader's professional task is to dissociate an image of the spirit which is causing sickness through dreams or through entrancing music or other means of divinations. We have seen how the affliction of Suad was assuaged when Anhar identified Gado. Until Gado made himself known, Suad was considered crazy. Anhar played the zar music that induced Suad's trance and made Gado manifest itself. In some other cases, the adept is encouraged to dissociate the image of her spirit through
her own dreams. Anhar encourages her adepts to "feel" or "sense" (tehes) their spirits by taking account of cravings, dreams and visions.  

We have also seen how Om Mohammad "feels" the demands of the masters when she prepares for her yearly ceremony. Anhar said that for a devotee to identify her own spirit or spirits, she ritually exposes herself to incense (tetbakhar) with a clear mind (safya) and with good intentions (niya salima) before going to sleep. She will know (te'raf) her spirit or spirits in her dreams.

In the story of Suad, Anhar was able to dissociate the active subject of Suad's experience, her master Gado, by recalling his song, because Suad and her group were not able to identify him on their own. They did not know that zar existed. To them Suad was crazy. She was the active subject in her suffering. When Gado is identified, he becomes the active subject of her state of suffering, her madness. Adopting zar as a concept of reality reverses the equation. Gado made Suad crazy.

Zar healing is based on the ability of the cult mistress to dissociate directly or indirectly the image of a master (or several of them) and to socialize the sufferer into experiencing such impressions first through zar music and songs and second into other ways of the cult that deals with the innate power of imagination as we have seen.

The music and songs provide the adept with the means to exteriorize her impression of passiones through trance. When the zar music is played, the adept is moved and experiences her master. In other words, music socializes trance, which is a special state of consciousness stemming from a certain conjunction of emotions and

33 Anhar said that zar cravings are like those of a pregnant woman (waham). In Egypt, pregnant women have strong cravings for certain foods that their families go out of their way to secure. Children born to women whose cravings have not been met are said to have birthmarks representing the food their mother's craved.
imagination. The adepts know their masters through their mimetic dances, visions, dreams, cravings and feelings.

The knowledge devotees experience in the ways of zar enhanced through music is an embodied knowledge and not mere "mental images." Music is the language that can speak simultaneously to mind and body without division. It is through music that the cult provides each entranced adept with a space in which she can directly experience her spirit identity, and enables her to communicate this identity to the outside world by performing mimetic dances to her audience (Rouget 1985:325-6).

We have seen, in the story of Suad, how the zar cult knowledge socializes adepts into experiencing the Sublime through music, dance and other means of divination. Zar techniques are about learning to experience one's inner feelings. Zar cult knowledge reestablishes contact with one's deepest feelings, perhaps even giving one integrity and sincerity (ikhlas), opening one's way (fath il-tariq) and bringing prosperity. Zar experience grants one embodied insights into the world which others recognize as valuable, both materially and spiritually.
CHAPTER V
LOCALIZATION OF BODIES IN TIME: LIFE CYCLE AND OTHER CRISES

1. Introduction

This chapter is about zAR affliction crises from the point of view of the initiand. A major time for zAR affliction symptoms occurs during special moments of anxieties surrounding life cycle transitions. In this chapter, I talk about the types of zAR afflictions that coincide with puberty, marriage, birthing and menopause through the stories of women that I have come to know as friends. Life cycle is not the only time where zAR afflictions tend to occur. In fact, a zAR crisis may occur for a variety of reasons; some are very serious and some are trivial.

The stories I retell in this chapter are typical and have been selected to show the sense of variation that characterizes zAR rituals and their flexibility. There is a great deal of variation on how each person with the continuous influence of their situated community tinkers with zAR practices to fit their own social and economic needs. I argue that the routine performance of zAR rituals results in secondary outcomes: zAR deploys a process by which the bodies of the afflicted are localized in time. Times of ritual cycle crises, as we will see in this chapter, become socialized through zAR initiations. These rites not only bring the person to zAR and its available social support and surrounding network, but they also ground a person in specific times and events associated with affliction and healing. Here the cumulative effect of
zar experiences due to a variety of afflictions and the knowledge that comes with
overcoming those afflictions gives the passing of time concrete names and values.
These zar experiences through time name and give those durations and extensions
of time properties. It adds to those memories of affliction and healing values and
meanings, as well as potential for legibility (Appadurai 1996:110).

2. The Crises of Teenage Years

The first episode of possession or zar ritual crisis usually occurs before
marriage when a woman is still a teenager. This first encounter with spirits usually
occurs in the bathroom. Some people recount that they actually see the spirits;
others just scream or faint. Within one’s home, the bathroom is where humans are
most vulnerable place to spirit attacks particularly after sunset. The bathroom is the
antithesis of sociability and the epitome of pollution (nagassa). It is sacrilegious to
eat or recite the Koran in the bathroom because of its perpetual state of ritual
pollution. However, in both rural and urban Egypt, Muslims are advised by each
other to use the following religious formula to protect the individual before stepping
into the latrine, particularly after sunset from the dangers one may encounter. “I
implore God to protect me against malice (khobs) and ugliness (khabatha).” One can
imagine the difficulty of following such advice every time one needs to enter a latrine
or a bathroom. One even wonders, if the formula is so effective, why people do not
use it all the time to protect themselves against possession.
Spirits and the Ritualization of the Latrines

The names of the spirits are not typically identified by the young teenager in the first episode of possession. The identity of the spirit or spirits in question requires ritual identification by zar diviners and knowledgeable initiates. The young teenager is usually encouraged to communicate with her spirits in dreams, followed by a visit to a goldsmith or a silversmith who specializes in zar amulets. There the possessed person’s state of mind changes in response to seeing the amulets required by her spirits for reconciliation. Such reaction confirms what the possessed has already seen in her dreams: the particular amulets, the color of the required clothing, and the foods associated with the spirit.

Almost all the first episodes that were recounted to me during fieldwork included possession by the spirit of the latrine Gado or the Ottoman officer Yawra. Gado is a Nigerian slave spirit that resides in the pothole of the latrine. The pothole acts as portal connecting the spirit who inhabits the earth and the human world. Gado is the slave of the spirits (‘abd il-assiyyad) and is the messenger between the human world and that of the zar spirits. He and his consort Mayram or Maryouma dress in light brown jute (kheish) hooded costumes inspired by Moroccan burnus. Their paraphernalia used to include a bucket and a broom specially decorated with pieces of jute cloth and jingling bells. Gado and Maryouma’s main affliction is infertility and madness. They get angry when hot water is thrown in the pot hole after sunset or when drops of menstrual blood or hymen blood fall in the pot.

Special ritual attention is given to Gado and his consort during zar ceremonies. During the zar rituals dedicated to their placation, the bathroom is
transformed to a ritual space through the use of incense, candles and other offerings. It is closed off from everyday use for a few hours. Those placating Gado may dance into trance in the bathroom quite often on their elbows and knees. A light brown candle is lit and a black rabbit is sacrificed. Drops of the sacrificial blood are poured in the pothole of the latrine and left for a time. Sweet candies are thrown on the floor and a few are dropped in the pothole as an offering to Gado. Nobody may use the bathroom until the end of the ritual. The rite dedicated to Gado and his consort ends when the initiate urinates and flushes the toilet.

At this early stage of the novice’s involvement with zar, a novice mostly lacks control over her trance possession. This stage is uncontrolled possession expressed in fits, fainting and screaming. These symptoms fade away as she or he engages in zar rituals and gradually and experientially learns to control her/his possession trance. The following case study is about Om Ashour. Her first episode of possession, which is discussed below, took place in the bathroom and is typical of many zar devotees.

The Story of Om Ashour

Om Ashour is a loud energetic and gregarious widow. When we first met she was in her early sixties. She owned and operated many prosperous family businesses throughout her life. Om Ashour has been married twice and has seven children—all married—and numerous grandchildren. Om Ashour has a lot of moxie and charm. Moral and wise, she is a fabulous story-teller with a great sense of humor. Her moral ammunition is informed by an extensive number of proverbs which
she learned from her mother. She is a pious Muslim, Sufi and a zar devotee. She prays five times a day, fasts in Ramadan, gives alms to the poor, and has been to the Hajj twice.

She was born in El Madbah, one of the butchers’ neighborhoods in Cairo. Her parents and many members of her extended family were also butchers. Her father died when she was young and her mother sold entrails at the market to support her four children. At the age of twelve, she moved out of her family’s home in El-Madbah to El-Zarayeb to live with her first husband, Abu Ashour. Soon thereafter, she conceived her first son, Ashour. Thus her name and status changed from Saadeya Dahab to Om Ashour, which literally means “mother of Ashour”. With her first husband she had four children: Ashour, Nimaa, Kawthar, and a girl who died in a fire accident at age fourteen.

Her eldest son, Ashour, has not talked to her in years. Om Ashour explains that his wife commissioned a sorcerer to separate them. This estrangement between mother and son is the result of a potent work of sorcery (‘amal) that Om Ashour had seen in the sorcerer’s home in the Mamluk cemetery, east of Cairo. That is because Abu Ashour’s second wife confessed, feeling grateful, after she was taken in along with her husband Abu Ashour by Om Ashour for a few months after their house collapsed. The second wife had earlier taken Ashour’s wife to the sorcerer and now, feeling remorse, she took Om Ashour to see for herself. Om Ashour describes this complex work of sorcery as consisting of two parts. The first part is a bundle containing bones from dead bodies which are buried in a tomb. The second part consists of a piece of cloth tied to a tree in the same graveyard. This latter is of the
most evil kind because every time the wind blows, the potency of the hex is renewed. The sorcerer asked for a fee to undo his work, but Om Ashour refused and told him that his act is evil, and that she will not participate in it. This is because the person who gets paid to undo sorcery can very well be paid double to reinstall sorcery. He has no principles or morals except to follow the highest bidder, according to Om Ashour.

Nimaa, her second child, who lives in the same neighborhood, is divorced and has one daughter. Her sister, Kawthar, is living with her Saudi husband in the city of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. She has two teenage sons and a younger daughter. Kawthar is the most prosperous of Om Ashour's children. She lavishes her mother with expensive gifts of gold and pays some of her considerable medical expenses. She and her family own an apartment in a middle class neighborhood in Cairo that they occupy during holidays and school vacations.

With Attallah, her second husband, Om Ashour had three children, two boys: Sayed and Ossama, and a girl: Azza. Sayed is a truck driver and does not talk to his mother either. He accuses her of injustice with regard to his inheritance, because she has recently given the coffee house and the soda shop to his younger brother Ossama. Om Ashour does not consider her self unjust because she had already spent more than 40,000 Egyptian pounds ($ 9,500), her life savings, to get Sayed out of jail when he was accused of running over and killing somebody in a car accident. Azza is married to a butcher, has one daughter and lives in another neighborhood. She spends a great deal of time visiting her mother. Om Ashour's
youngest son, Ossama, is twenty five years old. He, his wife, and two children live with Om Ashour.

Om Ashour and Attallah had owned and ran businesses together since their marriage forty years ago. They tried different business ventures, such as an entrails restaurant and a sandwich store, but they settled with a coffee house and a soda dispensary. Om Ashour used to work in this exclusively all-male coffee house everyday until after midnight. Once she even miscarried because she received a blow while trying to stop a fight in the coffee shop. A few months after Attallah’s death nine years before we met in 1996, Om Ashour’s arthritis condition worsened; she had great difficulty moving and had suffered a lot of pain in her legs. She decided to retire and leave both businesses to her youngest son.

Om Ashour’s First Encounter with Zar Possession

The recollections of Om Ashour’s first encounter with possession and of her early stages of ritual zar placation are typical among zar novices. Om Ashour is now almost paralyzed from the waist down and house-bound. In her last zar in 1996, she realized that she could no longer participate in zar because of her illness and its effect on her mobility. Consequently, she sold her zar amulets and gave away her zar costumes. Today her only relationship with zar is through reminiscent storytelling, mostly when I or other zar friends visit her. The events referred to in the following transcribed recollections occurred more than sixty years ago (late 1930 and early 1940s) and were a response to my probe: tell me about your first zar, when and why was it?
Om Ashour told me:

This was before I turned twelve; I had not menstruated yet, before I got married. I was still a girl. My mother had a contract in silence (‘as-sakt) for me [a zar contract] and [ritually] disposed of my stuff in the Nile [left over sacrificial skulls and other offering such as Henna, silver coins, candles, bread and yogurt or rice pudding]. When they [zar spirits] had just newly possessed me I used to faint (atrimi) and have fits (batshnig).

And that was that. I then put on weight, became prettier and got married.

Why? I had gone into the bathroom and I screamed. This is the cause—the original cause. So I became possessed (it-labast). I came out my arms and legs twisted (ma’yuga).

In our old neighborhood the Madbah, we had zar professionals close by, not like here. They were a few seconds away. There was a woman [zar sheikha] who used to drum the zar (dakat zar) every Monday during the day. The zar beat was old style—not like these days.

The mistress was a black woman (samra). She lived only a block away in the same alley (harah). My mother went to her and got her to come immediately when my arms were twisted. The zar mistress immediately burned some incense and officiated the incense rite for me (mebakharani) and she started speaking the language of zar (ratanet). She told my mother: you have to do a contract for her. She got possessed in the toilet (di malbussa fil- kabaneh). She officiated the ritual incense and did what was necessary. And then I had a vision in my dream (helmt bili shuftuh).
The next day the sheikha asked [my mother] if I saw something in my dream. My mother replied that indeed I saw a vision but that I said take me to Sayeda Zeinab neighborhood and I will get my stuff [take me to the gold smith and I will identify the amulets that I saw in my vision].

Low and behold, we used to have lots of gold smiths in the Sayeda neighborhood before they demolished the old streets. There was a Christian woman (khawagaya) who had a goldsmith shop, the moment I entered the store—my mother was already there commissioning bracelets and other stuff—I found my stuff [the gold and silver amulets she saw in her vision] and I screamed.

The goldsmith told my mother: “buy them for her.” My mother bought me the master and mistress [amulets] and a fish, and silver and everything that I foresaw in my dream. She also bought me the [sacrificial] birds. Within the week she set a kursi (offering table) with hazel nuts, almonds and walnuts as well birds, all the birds (sacrificial birds such as chickens, turkey, and pigeons). She also had the seventh day celebration. Then I stopped having fits and gained weight and got married. I had no problems for a while. That is because the mistress (the zar spirit) was wearing my gold bangles, my ankle-bracelets and my rings.

Hindrance to Marriage: The Story of Rasha

Rasha is a very pretty girl in her late teens with fair skin, blue eyes and dyed platinum blond hair. Rasha’s aunt Shadiya brought Rasha to Karima’s weekly
gathering to see whether the family’s suspicions about Rasha’s possession were true. Shadiya and her two sisters and her eldest brother are all zar adepts. They took after their mother, who has undergone many initiations. They are very proud to tell you that their mother sacrificed a camel in her hezam ceremony when she became a zar sheikha, the highest grade in the zar initiation trajectory.

Rasha's marriage arrangements failed twice without rational explanation. From the family point-of-view, Rasha is good-looking, from a well-to-do and well-respected family, is an excellent cook, and knows how to manage a household well. Her marriage arrangement had no rational reason to fail. The two suitors were well-to-do and from the neighborhood. They both cancelled their engagements without reasonable explanations.

According to the logic of zar possession, when these kinds of unexplained events take place, it is because Yawra, the Turkish officer and dandy spirit, is jealous and doesn’t want the object of his desire--in this case Rasha--to get married. Other symptoms that point to possession by Yawra could be nightmares, fear of the dark, anxiety, and bed wetting.

Young, marriageable girls are advised not to use a lot of makeup or look at themselves in the mirror very often, so as not to encourage Yawra to fall in love with them and possess them. Many unmarried girls that already practice zar have had manifested episodes of possession by Yawra or his daughter Rakousha or both.

Neither of Rasha’s parents know very much about zar, while the other members of the family—Shadiya’s two sisters and her eldest brother, who are all zar initiates--don’t attend the hadra. The two sisters are old and housebound; they
hardly go out at all. The brother, on the other hand, would like to maintain his zar involvement out of the public eye, particularly in his own neighborhood, because it might negatively affect his public image. After all, I was told by Shadiya that it is shameful for a man of stature to be a zar initiate. Whenever he had the urge to attend the weekly gathering, he either came very late at night to Anhar's hadra or went to another far away gathering, in a different neighborhood where he was not recognizable.

When Rasha came to Karima's weekly gathering with her aunt and mother, she at first sat quietly next to them for a while listening to different songs calling various spirits. The Upper Egyptians and the Tambura musicians played, one after the other. This was the first time that Rasha attended a zar hadra. However that does not mean that Rasha had not heard zar tunes before or was not familiar with some spirit names. Children in the heart of Cairo attend their neighborhood's zars from an early age, which helps them build vague notions about zar.

When the Geitaniya started playing the tune of Yawra, Rasha was heavily affected. At first her mood changed (it'akaret) in response to the calling of Yawra through song. Her aunt Shadiya encouraged her to descend to the meydan (dance floor). Rasha could not resist the music. She danced following the teaching gestures of the group leader; but soon, because it was her first time, she started screaming hysterically and then fell on the floor, almost fainting. All these reactions definitely confirmed her possession.

Now that fact of her possession was no longer in question, confirmed by her reaction to zar songs, her aunt Shadiya wanted Sheikha Karima to identify Rasha's
attar (trace) in order to determine what needed to be ritually done to appease the spirit of Yawra and Rokoush and to discover the possible identity of other spirits that may possess Rasha. Sheikhhah Karima took a handkerchief from Rasha to determine the atar (zar divination), and continued monitoring her response to the different zar songs. Rasha also reacted to tunes of Rakousha and the Christian spirits.

Because Rasha is only 20 years of age and is still single, she cannot have her own public zar ceremony with music. In the Batniya neighborhood, it is considered inappropriate for unmarried women to hold a public zar celebration. Girls in the neighborhood usually undergo an initiation called ‘as-sakt (without music), in which animals corresponding to their possessing spirits are ritually sacrificed by an officiating sheikh or sheikha. The body of the initiate is then anointed with sacrificial blood and then, if they have already experienced a zar trance in response to music, they join the hadra afterwards. Girls who have never experienced a musical trance don’t need to go the hadra; their relationship to the cult is through the cult sheikh or sheikha only.

From the moment zar possession was identified, it took approximately four years of family deliberation for Rasha to have her first zar initiation. Until then, she was still single, with marriage arrangements always failing because of Yawra’s jealousy. Six months after the placation of Yawra in ritual, she was married to a young man from the neighborhood. When she moved to her new house with her husband, Sheikha Karima was invited to officiate the rite of doorman’s rooster (deek il-bawab) to appease the spirits inhabiting her new apartment. A red rooster is ritually slaughtered and the sacrificial blood anoints the threshold of the apartment.
The sacrificed rooster is not consumed by members of the family but has to be given away to the doorman of the apartment building or to somebody who may act in his role (for instance a neighborhood watchman).

3. Pregnancy and Birthing

Another zar ritual that coincides with anxieties occurring around an important life cycle in women’s lives concerns childbirth. Here the unborn child, while still in the womb, is incorporated into the zar community to insure the protection of God, Prophets, the saints, and the spirits. The following narrative is based on a transcription of a taped conversation between Om Ashour and myself. Here, Om Ashour recounts the initiation of her first child when she was seven months pregnant. Unlike Rasha’s rooster sacrifice when she moved to her new home, Om Ashour’s second initiation was to protect her baby.

Om Ashour’s Pregnancy

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, Om Ashour’s first zar placation ceremony was a few months before her marriage. Within the first year of her marriage, Om Ashour was pregnant at 13 years of age. When she became pregnant, members of her situated community advised her to hold a protective zar ritual for the baby before birthing.

Om Ashour recounts:

*When I married the father of my children, I soon became pregnant. They told me that I have to have a contract for the newborn. A change of baby clothing,*
the baby cover (laffa) and the diaper were all anointed with a drop of blood from the sacrificial birds before I gave birth. The baby was still in my belly; I was seven month pregnant. I was anointed with (the blood of) only two pairs of pigeons for the dastour (zar): a white pair and a red pair. The change of clothes for the new born, the cover and the cloth diaper were anointed with blood (zafart) in silence (‘as-sakt). Imagine! There are people who descend in response to drums (daq) on the seventh month of pregnancy. After that I began to have zar habitually (‘awayed) every year.

Getting Pregnant: The Story of El Hagga Om Ossama

I have known Om Ossama since 1981 as one of the co-owners of a well known silversmith's store in the jewelers' quarters in Cairo. When I first knew her, she was married to her cousin, and worked with him side-by-side in their family business. She had four children and is now a grandmother. When I started getting interested in zar amulets, I spent a lot of time in her family store and we became well acquainted.

Now, Om Ossama is over seventy years old and a widow. She has been on the pilgrimage to Mecca and people call her *hagga* (pilgrim). Her piety has earned her a great deal of respect in the silver market among clients, dealers and craftsmen alike.

After her husband had died in the earthquake that hit Cairo in 1992, Om Ossama and her two sons, Ossama and Abd El Aziz, together ran the well-established silversmith store. Each one of them runs a separate side of the business. Now, she is the only one left in the family who knows about zar. The family business still maintains a foot in both the traditional and the tourist markets. It is one of the few silversmith
shops that still cater to zar clients in the jewelers’ quarter in Cairo.

Despite meager returns compared to other aspects of the business, Om Ossama makes sure that zar amulets are salvaged from the piles of junk silver for her clients. She maintains that side of the business by placing new orders with specialized craftsmen. Because of her knowledge about zar, many clients come to her for advice. Once I witnessed a very intense possession episode in the store where the possessed spoke in tongues as a response to seeing the amulets that her spirits required. Unlike Om Ashour, this client was not a novice; the possession episode was very elaborate and lasted for at least 15 minutes. Everybody in the two story shop froze in their place until the woman left the store.

Om Ossama’s sons knew I was studying zar. They told me that she was once a zar devotee and arranged my visit to their mother’s house for afternoon tea in 1992, as the demands of the business made it impossible to have a peaceful conversation in the shop. Her son and two other guests were also present during the visit. She told me that she had stopped practicing zar by the time she went to pilgrimage in Mecca with her husband in the 1980s. I asked her about her experience with zar. She told me that she was first married in the late 1950s. When Om Ossama did not become pregnant during the first two years of her marriage, her mother in-law and aunt suspected zar possession.

In preparation for her private zar ceremony, gold and silver jewelry, clothing and sacrificial birds were bought to fulfill the demands (talabat) of the masters. The jewelry included two silver anklets with bells, and two silver bracelets, a gold framed red heart (qalb) pendant, Sudanese black and white glass (sumluk) set in a gold amulet for the
forehead (*hegab ras*) and an amulet for *Sit Safina* (the mistress of the sea). They made a big night of it and brought three bands: *zar Sa’idi* (Upper Egyptian), *tambura* and *zar* Abul Gheit. She said she was young and looked like a bride on her wedding night. The *zar* reconciliation worked, because soon after she became pregnant with her first son and never had any more *zar* problems.

4. Menopause: The Grand Lady

One of the most important *zar* rituals is dedicated to the Old or Grand Lady. The Grand Lady (*is-sit il-kebira*) afflicts her victims with symptoms of aging usually when they are in their forties. In the following transcription, Om Ashour had already been initiated into the cult of the Grand Lady. She recounts how the Lady (*is-sit*) punished her because she did not follow what the spirits wanted. The spirits had ordered her to become a *zar* diviner and *sheika* and run a weekly *hadra* after years of having annual *zar* celebrations with music and hosting ceremonies. Om Ashour even bought an incense burner for that purpose and was contemplating following the Grand Lady’s demands. But the pressure of running her household and business made her decide against going through with the girding ceremony to become a *zar* diviner and healer. The Grand Lady then punished Om Ashour by making her blind for nine months. She was healed only when she celebrated with a *zar* night for the Grand Lady.

Om Ashour told me:

*Every year I held a zar ceremony and I sacrificed. By the prophet they [the spirits] asked me to do the girding ceremony (*athazim*). They asked me to*
divine for others and do a weekly gathering (hadra). When I did not follow their commands, il-sit il-kebira hit me in the eye and I remained nine whole months without opening or closing my eyes. So I did an evening of zar. I got some tripe and innards—they [the spirits] love innards and tripe, lots of fish, and a live goose. I had a wonderful celebration from sunset to dawn, and I had the seventh day celebration in the Nile.

The Zar of the Grand Lady

Zar is-sit il-kebira literally means the ritual celebration of the old woman or lady. It is different from any other zar ritual within the zar ritual complex practiced in Cairo. The rituals associated with the Grand Lady exhibit many influences that originate in the Hausa bori spirit possession cult of Nigeria; whereas other zar rituals show similarities to the Ethiopian zar spirit possession (Littman 1951).

The beginning of the reconciliation rites placating the Grand Lady are performed between midnight and dawn in one single night. The beginning of zar rituals, on the other hand, is usually performed in an evening and a day. Both rituals are followed by a period of seclusion ending with the seventh day celebration. Om Ashour celebrated the seventh day ritual ending her seclusion in a boat in the river Nile which is called zar il-bahr (the river). She usually offered fish and a goose to the spirits of the river (meluk il-bahr).

Quite often the sacrificial rite for the spirit Gado, the spirit of the latrine, and his family or that for the spirit of the doorman (il-bawab), is also performed along with the rites of the Grand Lady. In a zar hosting ceremony, the second phase of zar
rituals lasts for three days and nights. When the initiand of a hosting ceremony is
possessed by a member of the Grand Lady’s pantheon, the first of these nights is
then dedicated to the Grand Lady rituals. This first night usually starts very late and
has very few guests. The Grand Lady’s zar path is said to be hard and full of pain.

The Grand Lady or the Habouba (grandmother in Sudanese Arabic), as she is
sometimes called, is the chief zar spirit in a separate pantheon. Some members of
this pantheon overlap with the Upper Egyptian pantheon or the Tambura pantheon.
The pantheon of the Grand Lady consists of seven old women and seven Pashas (a
pasha is an Ottoman aristocratic title) or Masters. The spirits of the seven old
women are exclusive members of the Grand Lady’s pantheon, whereas the Pashas
are also members of the Tambura pantheons and are placated through song by the
current Upper Egyptian all-woman band groups.

The Old Ladies are six old black women from Sudan (Sub-Saharan Africa):
Arzuki, Shorombella, Rora, Dawa Baba Kiri, Magaziya, and the Lady Inmatan Yaro.
The seventh old woman is white and is named Folla. These spirits are all
manifestations of the Grand Lady. In conversation about possession, any one of
them is not referred to by her name but as the Grand Lady. A black goat or chicken
is sacrificed for each of the black spirits and a similar white animal for the white
Grand Lady.

The spirit-Pashas are Rumi Nagdi, Hakim Basha, Yawra Bey, Rima Basha,
Collita Basha, Welzami Basha and ‘Okashi Basha. The names of the members of
Grand Lady Pantheon differ from one zar leader to the next. Sometimes they even
differ from one interview to the next with the same person.
Both Rumi Nagdi and Hakim Basha are members of the lineage of Mamma, the paramount chief of the Upper Egyptian pantheon. White sheep or chickens are offered in sacrifice to each of them and to members in their family. Rumi Nagdi is a Turkish dandy warrior from the Najd region in Arabia. His name reflects his ethnic origin; Rumi means Turkish and Najdi means the one from the Najd region. Thus his name may be translated as the Arabian Turk.

Hakim Basha is a physician who is one of the ministers (sing. wazir) of Mamma. He wears a tall red fez, a physician’s white coat and carries a stethoscope. The administrative title hakimbashi was also used within Egyptian bureaucracy under the Ottomans to refer to the chief physician in a directorate or governorate (Klunzinger 1878).

Yawra Bey is originally a member of the Sudani Tradition. Yawer is a rank in the Egyptian Ottoman army which means aide-de-camp. Yawra is a handsome Turkish officer who is mostly perceived as dark skinned (asmar) and who loves women. Yawra wears a red fez and a red sash (yafa) worn diagonally across his chest. This is to emulate the Egyptian military costume of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Other than song recordings, I know very little about the other four pasha spirits Rima Basha, Collita Basha, Welzami Basha and ‘Okashi Basha except that they are all black members of Egyptian Tambura pantheon. They also appear in the Sudanese zar bori pantheon (Constantines 1972). For these pasha-spirits black chickens or sheep are sacrificed.
The logic that provokes possession within all cults of the zar ritual complex, including that of the Grand Lady, is the same. Humans unintentionally provoke the wrath of the zar spirits. Humans may accidentally step on spirits or pour hot water in their way because they are not visible. Humans may be disrespectful to spirits by mocking the possession of a person. In such a case the disrespected spirit retaliates by afflicting the mocker with possession by the same spirit they mocked in the first place. Humans may also mistreat animals, such as a cat or dog, which may be spirit familiars who punish humans with possession.

In retaliation, every zar spirit afflicts his human victim with a variety of symptoms. The symptoms of affliction differ from one spirit to the other. The Grand Lady’s rage shows on the bodies of the possessed as physical symptoms associated with old age. Messages of her dissatisfaction of her human victims show in their dreams and nightmares. The punishments of the Grand Lady signify her own attributes: blindness, un-localized pains and aching bones, arthritis, and paralysis, among others.

When the Grand Lady commanded Om Ashour to become a zar diviner, and she did not follow the spirit command, she was punished by problems in her eyes. Until Om Ashour was able to gather the finances necessary for a reconciliation ceremony, she remained blind.

Unlike other rites within the zar ritual complex—where a zar spirit takes hold of a devotee’s body when called through ritual songs—in the Grand Lady’s zar any member of her pantheon may only possess a ritual specialist called Kodiya.
The *Kodiya* of the Grand Lady

A *Kodiya* is a female specialist within the *zar* ritual complex. Her job is to embody any member of spirit pantheon of the Grand Lady during rituals. Not every *zar sheikh* or *sheikha* (male or female leader) is a *Kodiya*. Sheikha Anhar was also a *Kodiya* whose Grand Lady spirit is Fulla, the only white Grand Lady. On the other hand, her daughter Karima is only a *sheikha* who can oversee and officiate the rituals of the Grand Lady but not host or receive the spirits of her pantheon. The word *Kodiya* has been used by outsiders, including scholars, to refer to any *zar sheikha*. This misconception has been continuously propagated by the popular Egyptian press since the beginning of the twentieth century. This is not only because journalists write from an outsider perspective, but also because *zar* leaders participate in this construction and go along with outsiders’ expectations, as I have witnessed during my fieldwork.

However, within the cult, only a woman who has been afflicted by a member of the Grand Lady’s pantheon and has been healed through several initiation rituals and offerings can become a *Kodiya*. The word *Kodiya* is originally Hausa and means horse in reference to the *buri* spirit mounting her victim (Besmer 1983). In the old days there were both white and black *Kodiyas*, but these days devotees insist on having only a black *kodiya*.

A *zabia* is a *Kodiya*’s apprentice or assistant; she must be an initiate of the cult of the Grand Lady. Her job is to prepare the special foods offered to Grand Lady such as pumpkin compote and a desert made by pressing sesame and nuts into
finger-like shapes by hand, while extracting the sesame oil to be used as massaging oil for the aching feet of the initiand.

The Rituals of the Grand Lady

In the zar rituals—dedicated to members of the Upper Egyptian or Tambura pantheons, when members of the Grand Lady’s pantheon are called through their corresponding songs, they inhabit the bodies of the afflicted devotees and possess them in trance dance performances. During the zar of Grand Lady, however, possession is manifested differently in response to special rotana (foreign or African) songs. The rhythm of the singing is usually kept by up to six musicians by clapping on hard packed cotton pillows (id-darb ‘alal-makhada). This is because it said that the Grand Lady does not like loud noise (Mazloum 1975: 69). The singing follows a call and response form. The initiand does not dance but performs a rebirth ritual together with the Kodiya.

This ritual consists of two parts: a performative rite mimicking birthing and a possession consultation session. For the birthing rite, the Kodiya and the initiand are covered by two cloth sheets (melayas) by the presiding sheikha and her music band. The first sheet is white and may be an ordinary bed sheet. The second sheet is black, and was usually an outer garment used by urban women in the past but may also be a piece of black cloth bought specifically for this purpose. The zar musicians sing and drum on hard pillows, calling on the different spirits of the Grand Lady’s pantheon. The hard pillows are placed on the sides of the sheets. While together both the initiand and the Kodiya go through a symbolic rebirth under the sheets.
During that ritual the initiand is considered possessed and may sleep, yawn or moan. The kodiya, on the other hand, receives one of the spirits of this pantheon. After the removal of the two sheets, the possessing spirit speaks through the medium of the kodiya, who diagnoses the troubles of the initiand first and then those of her guests. These are not necessarily possession troubles. I witnessed the kodiya's possession by Hakim Basha, the physician who offered advice and consultation to the zar guests in exchange for a few Egyptian pounds which the kodiya called fizeeita (physician fee).

5. The Disintegrated Plastic Flowers

The story of Shadiya is typical of not only of non life cycle zar but of all zar rituals. There is always a multitude of reasons to finance a zar. Shadiya is one of the zar adepts in the coterie of Sheikha Karima, daughter of the late Sheikha Anhar. The first time I met her was in the summer of 2000 when she again became a regular at the the Monday hadra after ten years of absence. Shadiya's participation in the weekly gathering during this period culminated in her second zar initiation, a night for the Christian spirits (leilat il-nassara). People call Shadiya by her nickname, Om Hussein (mother of Hussein), after her eldest son, or Hagga Om Hussein, the honorary title that women who undergo the Muslim rites of Pilgrimage to Mecca receive in their community.

When I first met her, Shadiya was in her early forties. She was born and raised in the Batiniya neighborhood, in the district of El Darb El Ahmar in the historic part of Cairo, sometimes referred to as El Madina (the city). She is bint bokhur (a
“daughter of incense”— she was raised with incense). Her mother was a well-respected woman in the neighborhood who was initiated into the highest ranks of the zar cult; a camel was sacrificed for her ceremony.

Shadiya is well built; heavy by Western standards, but in Egypt and particularly in the eyes of the Madina, she is not considered overweight. She is just right for her forty years of age, her affluence and the four children she bore. Om Hussein has light olive skin and very soft dark hair that rarely shows behind a carefully chosen modern “Islamic” headdress. One of my favorites is a black turban covering her hair, wrapped by a black velvet and crepe veil (tarha) framing her long and plump face. Shadiya has welcoming, smiling almond eyes lightly marked with black kohl and her lips lightly colored with pink lip-stick— all the make-up she ever wears. Her high cheek-bones quickly change color into a light pink blush when she laughs. She speaks very softly and with a lot of compassion and confidence. Om Hussein is very cordial and pleasant, which has helped her keep friendly relations with the other adepts of the hadra. She has a very personal style of dressing that reveals the energy she has invested in looking good, which in turn contributes to her status in the community and among the women of the hadra. Shadiya wears nice abayas (a formal outer garment, a traditional overcoat) and interesting head dresses all in black, the customary color of the outer garments for the women in the Medina. Shadiya carefully chooses her clothes and her adornments on various trips to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj (Islamic pilgrimage) or the 'umrah (Islamic visitation of holy sites in Mecca and Medina in non-pilgrimage time). Just like most well-to-do women of the neighborhood, Shadiya wears almost all her Venetian (21 karat) gold jewelry when

136
she goes out: a few bracelets on each hand, many rings, and several juxtaposed pendants suspended by heavy, intricate gold chains in variable lengths, in addition to a heavy necklace. The visual effect of all this bright gold is accentuated by the black silky textured background of the ankle-length abaya, the headdress crowning her forehead and the veil framing her face.

Om Hussein is a member of a very well known, influential and respected family in the neighborhood. Her brothers and her sisters' husbands own important businesses in the neighborhood and are known to be tough, feared, and well respected mu’allems (community leaders).

The family is also very involved in the yearly celebration of the neighborhood patron saint, Fatma el Nabaweya, the granddaughter of Hussein, the patron saint of Cairo and the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad. Islamic devotional music is performed and the dervishes and other seekers gather every Monday and during the saint's festival to dance into trance in a multi-colored marquis tent set for the occasion in the piazza facing the shrine.

The saint's festival celebration lasts for a whole week during late summer. Sufi orders from all over Egypt set their tents with their banners around the neighborhood and offer food and tea to devotees and passers by. This week of celebrations culminates with the great night (il-leila ik-Kabira), which attracts the saint's devotees from all over Egypt who come to visit the shrine, ask for the saint's mediation, listen to Muslim devotional music and song, join the dervishes' zikr (rites of remembrance that culminate in trance), play the traveling gypsy games (shooting
galleries, tests of strength and swings) and sit sipping tea and smoking water pipes while watching the crowd go by in the main piazza.

The Mu'allems of the neighborhood, including Shadiya's brothers and brothers in-law, sponsor the celebration by paying for the zikr musical performance and the animal (usually a bull) sacrificed in honor of the saint after a long procession led by the neighborhood youth singing for the saint. The meat is distributed as gifts in honor of the saint (nafaha) to the dervishes and the poor, who gather to receive their share just after the fagr (dawn) prayer. The heart of the animal goes to the person who financed the costly bull, acknowledging the great honor of this sponsorship.

The year I met Shadiya, I was walking towards the shrine during the night of the festival just one hour before the sacrifice, Shadiya called me to join her company. She was sitting with a group of six or seven women who had a very good and privileged view of the piazza where the zikr took place. They sat in the first row, elevated so that they can see everything that is going on. I joined the group to watch the trance dancing. Every now and then Shadiya would call on one of the servers to bring a coke, a cup of tea or a water pipe for her guests.

Shadiya is happily married to a wealthy man, by neighborhood standards. "My husband owns a smelting factory, NOT A WORKSHOP," Shadiya told me insistently. She lives in a very well-kept three bedroom apartment with her immediate family not far away from Karima's hadra and the rest of her siblings.

Om Hussein is very proud of how she decorates her apartment. Every year she has it repainted and redecorated. She has a modern kitchen and a nice
bathroom with expensive ceramic tiles along the walls reaching the ceilings. This year she had the apartment repainted pink, her favorite color, and changed the ceramic tiles on all the floors of the apartment. The hallway (sallah), which is a large rectangular open space, is used as a living and dining room. The living room is decorated with plastic flowers in various colors hanging all around the walls, and pots of green hanging plastic plants in the four corners of the room that she had brought all the way from Saudi Arabia on her most recent Hajj trip there last winter. The partition between the dining and the living area is marked by two marbled columns on each side of the room supporting a false arch decorated with elaborate plaster of Paris work. A mosaic of mirrors of different shades adds to the presentation. Her dining room set is crackled lacquered white in a Louis XVI-inspired style. The dining table is oval with 8 chairs and, the buffet is wide and tall, almost reaching the ceiling, with glass doors that show off her carefully displayed china set.

When Shadiya was having her apartment repainted early this summer, a strange incident happened. She had collected all her plastic flowers and foliage carefully in plastic bags to protect them from being painted over. When the job was done and the painters had left the apartment, she wanted to clean and arrange the furniture back in its place and hang the foliage back on the walls of the reception area. To her amazement the foliage had disintegrated; not one piece was intact. In her mind there was no rational explanation for this mishap; she had stored the plastic foliage very carefully away from the heat of the sun; the foliage was not cheap and was of foreign provenance (implying that it is of good quality) and had only been on the wall for a short period. Considered out of the ordinary, the incident
made Shadiya worry and suspect that her spirits—particularly the Nassara (the Christians)—were acting out. She had not had any symptom of affliction for ten years since she had her first initiation. This episode led Shadiya back to the hadra. When she told Sheikha Karima about her disintegrated plants, Karima responded that her spirits were jealous because she gives too much attention to her apartment, and that she should sacrifice a rooster at the threshold for the guardians of the place (il-horas).

Shadiya never followed Sheikha Karima’s advice; instead, she held a night for the Christian spirits in her sister’s house. Her decision to hold the more costly musical zar rather than the simple rooster sacrifice for the guardians of her home in my opinions was motivated by many social concerns rather than supernatural ones. These motivations had to do with her relationship with her brothers and sisters, her symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977:181) and position as a returnee to Karima’s hadra, and perhaps her relationship with her husband who does not particularly approve of zar.

Shadiya’s zar night for the Christian spirits was a family affair; only three guests from the hadra were invited. It was an opportunity for the two house-bound sisters, the brother who does not like to associate with zar publicly, and Shadiya to enjoy zar together. Shadiya’s siblings provided most of the financing: the contract with the three bands of musicians, and the noqta (gifts of money publically offered during ritual celebrations) to honor the initiand cost around LE1200. Shadiya provided the price of the live birds (a turkey and a white chicken) and the food for the altar, which cost around LE 200.
By holding a zar, Shadiya reestablished herself as a member of the cult of Anhar after years of estrangement. This estrangement was due to the fact that a few years earlier, Anhar had heard that Shadiya went to another hadra outside the neighborhood and dealt with another Sheikha there. There is a great deal of competition between cult leaders over the continuous loyalty of their customary zar devotees. Cult leaders don’t like it when their habitués go to other zar specialists and tend to sever relationship with the client. In fact, a great deal of conflict arises from the movement of one zar client from one cult to another.

Shadiya’s husband thinks that zar is not Islamic and that it is a superstitious practice. A few years earlier he paid for Shadiya’s trip to the hajj in Mecca on the condition that she gives up zar completely. So holding a zar at her sister’s place, financed by her siblings, left Shadiya’s husband no room for objection. Once Shadiya was back to zar it was easier to hold future zars in her own home. Between the year 2000 and 2005, Shadiya held two more elaborate zar reconciliation ceremonies in her own home.

6. Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, many zar crises coincide with anxious times surrounding life cycle rites which mark status transition in the lives of women. A young girl’s transition to womanhood and concerns about marriage may trigger her first possession episode marking her vulnerability to spirit attacks. Here, the pot hole is a portal that connects the human world to that of the zar spirits. It is the habitat of Gado, the messenger of the spirits, and controller of fertility. With the first
ritual reconciliation, zar ideally becomes a cyclical habit ('adah) that grounds and localizes the devotee in time throughout her life: her marriage, her moving into her husband's place, her first baby, her infertilities, and her menopause along with other crises that may occur. Her crises become legible, and named through involvement and participation in zar. Zar participation and knowledge localize the duration and extension throughout the unfolding of one's crises by giving those names and properties, values and meanings (Appadurai 1996:110).

The first episode of possession may not always culminate in a zar ritual reconciliation. Sometimes, it may take years before a person suffering from spirit attacks undergoes their zar reconciliation ceremony just like in the example of Rasha discussed in this chapter. For a zar event to take place, depends on many social and economic factors.

I have met women who have seen zar spirits in the bathroom before their marriage but never placated the spirits. I have also met women who, like the story of Shadiya discussed above, had a reconciliation ceremony to consolidate family relations or to re-position themselves within the hierarchy of a hadra congregation. There is a great deal of variation on how each person afflicted with zar negotiates their situation within their respective community. Not only to amass the financial resources necessary for such endeavor but also to convince one's situated community of the seriousness of one's possession claim and one's readiness for a zar commitment ideally throughout one's life.
CHAPTER VI

LOCALIZATION OF BODIES IN SPACE: A RITUAL SAMPLER

In the name of God, most benevolent, ever-merciful.

All Praise Be to Allah: Lord of all the worlds,
Most beneficent, ever-merciful, king of the Day of Judgment.
You alone we worship, and to You alone turn for help
Guide us (O Lord) to the path that is straight, the path of those you have
blessed,
Not those who have earned your anger, nor those who have gone astray
(The Koran, the Opening Sura, trans. Ali)

1. The Offering of Incense

The Rite of the Openings (il-fawatih)

The Opening Sura (al-fatiha) of the Koran is the fundamental Muslim
prayer. It plays a very important role in the ritual life of all Muslims. The Opening
is a prayer that is essential in the daily performance of the five times a day salat
ritual, one of five pillars of Islam. It is repeated in every prostration (rak’a), the
basic ritual unit repeated in every prayer. Al-fatiha is memorized by every Muslim
at a very young age. In Cairo when I was growing up, beyond the context of
salat, the Opening Sura was also used by Egyptian Muslims to ask God for help
and protection particularly at the beginning of something, for example an exam, a
new job, moving into a new place, etc. The Opening Sura is also recited to
sanctify any contract, from marriage to business, as well as to honor and pray for
the salvation of deceased Muslims: strangers, relatives, prophets and saints.

In zar rituals, the Opening is used as the central part of a special ritual
formulae performed at the beginning of any zar performance called the Openings
(il-fawatīḥ). This important rite is always performed with the accompaniment of
incense to render the body of the zar-seeker pure and thus attractive to spirits
and ready to receive them. These occasions include going to the hadra to dance
into trance, or in a public reconciliation ceremony or before going to sleep to
communicate with spirits in one's dreams or diagnose possession. The recitation
of the Openings in conjunction with the incense rite (il-bukhur) is the basic ritual
tool of the zar trade; it is used by sheikhs and sheikhas to diagnose possession
in others and to invite their own spirits in their dreams for divination purposes.

The following piece is a description of the ritual use of incense in the
Openings rite and its context based on a combination of my field notes and
transcriptions from a tape recording of a three-day zar event that I witnessed in
the summer of 1996. I chose to represent the rite in this fictionalized descriptive
style in an attempt to preserve something of the texture of a zar rite as part of life
and its intensity: the exchange of money, the screaming children, and other
concerns and action that takes place while the ritual is in full performance.

This particular event was very significant to me, because it was my first
complete observation of a zar hosting (diyafa). It was also important because I
came to know Om Ashour, the hosting initand in such events, very well and we
became friends; I still visit with her when I go to Cairo to see my family every year.

I had gained enough rapport after my initiation with Sheikha Anhar that she finally allowed me to tag along with her female zar professional band. Sheikha Anhar was supposed to officiate Om Ashour’s hosting ceremony, but she became gravely ill just a few days before, and sent her daughter Sheikha Karima to officiate the zar hosting in her place. A month later Anhar died.

Om Ashour’s hosting ceremony was nine years overdue. She has wanted to hold a zar since her husband died nine years earlier. But she could not afford the expenses. During those nine years she was very ill and could hardly move. Now that she visited, the saint Fatma Al-Nabaweya and attended Anhar’s hadra, she could not resist the desire to host a zar like she has always done. She sold her six thick gold bracelets. The monetary value of two of them financed her zar ceremony. The rest of the money financed a refurbishing project for the coffee shop now run by her son. She also paid some physician’s bills with what is left of the money.

Description of the Rite of the Openings

Karima’s incense is slowly filling the air with a pleasant smell. “PRAY BY THE PROPHET!”\textsuperscript{34} She shouts while adding more incense from her mother’s brass box (‘elba) to the burning amber in the incense burner (mabkhara). The

\textsuperscript{34} A formula used to command attention. “Pay attention” is its cultural parallel in the English language.
solemn tone of her voice gathers everybody's attention. A moment of silence prevails.

Karima begins to ritually purify Om Ashour's body with the fragrant smoke. This is a rite that prepares the human body for the descent of zar spirits. The incense purifies the body and renders it suitable to be inhabited by spirits, who like purity (tahara). Zar people say that zar spirits are drawn to human bodies by their favorite incense scents—including amber, musk, mastic, and sandalwood—and by the blood of sacrificial animals.

With the incense burner balanced on a small tray in her right hand, Karima steps forward closer to the seated Om Ashour. The latter grabs a note of ten Egyptian pounds from a small cloth bag secured to her undergarment with a safety pin. She tucks the bag back under her white dress. She puts the crumpled note in Karima's tray. Then she collects the tip of her white gauze, loosely covering her head, in both hands in anticipation. Karima kisses the crumpled note, raises her right hand with the note rapidly touching her forehead, and then puts the money carefully in her cloth bag tucking it back in her chest.\(^{35}\) She leans over and carefully holds the incense tray a few inches under Om Ashour's chin as she starts reciting *il-fawatiḥ* (pl. of Fatiha, the Opening Sura of the Koran) in a clearly enunciated and steady voice:

The Opening Sura for the prophet,

For the beloved of the prophet,

For the allies of the prophet, the wives of the prophet,

\(^{35}\) Kissing money or bread and then touching one's forehead is a common rite for thanking God for his blessing (*ne'emmat rabina*). Karima usually does this with her first earnings of the day.
For the descendants of the prophet

The incense smoke penetrates the space contained by the white gauze still held by Om Ashour. She inhales the smoke in a deep breath. In response to Karima’s call, she reverentially recites the Opening Sura in silence; only her lips are moving. Some of the adults standing by join Om Ashour in this silent recitation.

Others exhibit a posture of reverence in honor of the Prophet Mohammad and the long list of holy men and women that Karima’s formula calls on to intercede on the *ayana’s* (the sick person) behalf.

Karima then takes Om Ashour’s right hand in her left hand, releasing the tips of her white gauze. Karima passes the incense burner first under Om Ashour’s right arm and then under the left arm while she continues to recite the *fawatiḥ*:

And for all those who take refuge in the prophet.

For Omar and Osman and Ali,

Abu Bakr, the friend of prophet.

Prophets and holy men (*awliya*):

Fatma El Nabawyeya, Rab’a El ‘Adaweya,

And the guard (*ghafira*) of Egypt (*masr*)\(^\text{36}\): El Sayeda Zeinab.

Karima places the incense burner on the ground in between Om Ashour’s legs to allow the smoke to rise under her garment. She bends over and takes Om

\(^{36}\text{*masr* may also mean Cairo.}\)
Ashour's right foot in her right hand, and passes it over the incense burner and then lifts her left foot as the fawatih formula comes to its end, imploring the spirit masters to take away the affliction:

O my Masters take my hands unconditionally\(^{37}\)

In the name of the prophet who brings us guidance (il-hadi).

By the life of the prophet of the Muslim community (umma)

Drive this calamity (ghoma) away from her.

Take the smoke and give her strength (‘afiya) and proof (burhan)

By the right (ha’) of the prophet--may peace and prayer be upon him.

Azza and I ululate to cheer Om Ashour and mark the completion of her incense rite (il-bukhur). Women standing by wish her health and a successful ritual (yeg’alhulak bil shifa). As Karima slips away from the lobby, the formal atmosphere created by the fawatih rite dissipates.

2. The Offering of Blood: The Sacrificial Rite

Preparation for the Sacrificial Rite

Preparation for Om Ashour's debih (sacrifice) is a major undertaking. The lack of direct access to a water source complicates the preparation. The ewe, chickens, and rabbits have to go through ablution (wodow) with clean water to be ready for the sacrificial rite. Water for ablution needs to be brought into the lobby where the sacrifice will take place in a large basin. Another basin to collect the

\(^{37}\) bil awadi (with hands).
sacrificial blood needs to be set in place. Candles for the procession (zaffa) have to be distributed and lit.

In the lobby, there is a great deal of confusion: shouting, and carrying on when Azza, Om Ashour’s daughter, brings the short white candles from upstairs. Children jump up and down begging for candles. Om Ashour calls on the women sitting in the alley to take candles for the procession (zaffa). Fatma, one of Anhar’s band members, asks for a plate and a basin for the sacrificial blood. The wife of Om Ashour’s son Ossama runs upstairs to their apartment on the third floor to get them. Her three-year-old son screams for his mother; mama.

As Sheikha Karima steps back into the lobby, she tries to control the chaos and announces authoritatively: “Candles are only for women. . . . Don’t give any to children. . . . Light the candles. . . . Get matches.” With her eyes, she assigns me to the task of lighting the candles now in the hands of a few standing female guests who have gathered around Om Ashour.

Fatma tries to continue her work purifying the sacrifice. She cries, “Where is the water?”

Om Ashour asks her daughter-in-law about the water. “Do you want us to go upstairs again!” replied Ossama’s wife irritably.

“No don’t go upstairs; get water from the neighbors,” says Om Ashour, stopping Azza from going upstairs again. Ululations.

In an attempt to restore order again, Sheikha Karima calls: “PRAY BY THE PROPHET!”
But this time it has no effect on the noisy hubbub, caused mostly by the overexcited children. “Give me a candle,” a child begs.

“No! It is wrong (ghalat) to give candles to children.” Ululations again.

Then in full-blown voice Karima announces: “If you are worried about your children [from spirit possession] take them away from here.” Instantly the children disappear from the lobby.

“Where is the plate?” asks Karima.

“Take the rings,” said Om Ashour to Karima.

Om Ashour has sold six gold bracelets, mostly sold to finance this zar hosting ritual. She is now taking off what remains of her gold jewelry: a pair of earrings, a long chain with several zar pendants, and two chunky male rings. She throws each item in the porcelain plate now in Karima’s hand: Clink. Clink. Clink. Then Om Ashour takes off the heavy silver bracelet just bought a few days earlier to fulfill the demands of the Grand Mistress and hands it to Karima to add to the lot.

The zar jewelry items are collected in the china plate that was bought specifically for the occasion. A few drops of blood of each sacrificed animal is collected in the plate to anoint the jewelry and ailing parts of Om Ashour’s body.

“Do I stand or do I sit? What do I do?” asks Om Ashour confused and helpless. Her aching legs prevents her from participating in zar the way she has been used to and has known since she was still a young girl.

“Sit,” replies Karima.
"Where are the chickens and the other animals? Who is getting the water?" asks Fatma.

"Here they are," reply Om Ashour and Azza in unison pointing to a small palm wood crate (afas gerid) with two red chickens and two black rabbits.

"Where is the ewe?" called Fatma as she rolls her sleeves to start the ablution of the sacrificial animals.

"The ewe," shouts Sabah, the assistant, impatiently leaning over a plastic basin full of water next to Fatma.

Ossama's wife appears with the ewe. Fatma and her niece Sabah begin the ablution of the sacrificial animals: first the ewe, then the chickens, and then the rabbits. Sabah washes the face of the ewe three times with water, a ritual motif modeled after ablution in Islam, which prepares and purifies a Muslim for prayer. In this case it prepares the animals for the sacrifice. The ewe licks the water off her hand.

"She is thirsty," says Sayeda, another one of Anhar's band members.

"She is hungry," says another woman standing by.

They offer her some water: "Drink. Drink, O Dark One," says Sabah addressing the black ewe in a nurturing voice.

Fatma calls: "Dayman ya habayeb"—a call for nuqtat (gifts of money) to all of us: family members, friends and neighbors.

Om Ashour attempts to stand up but she fails: "I can't."

She emits a cry of pain: "Ah".

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38 *dayman ya habayeb* means literally, those who love her may always be there.
“Get somebody to assist her.” In response, her daughter Azza calls to her brother Ossama, who instantly hurtles into the lobby to assist his mother.

“Somebody needs to hold the ewe. . . . Put her feet in the basin.” orders Fatma.

“Only her front feet,” adds Karima

3. The Grand Lady’s Procession Parade

The first phase of the sacrificial rite is a procession parade (zafla is-sit, alternatively zafla il-dabayeh, or zafla il-teyur). Ideally the zar bride dances to specific spirit songs while parading with the sacrificial animals. Her bridesmaids follow her with lit candles in their hands, cheering her with ululations and in her honor give gifts of money (nuqta) to the musicians. Birds and rabbits are held by the bride or balanced on her head and shoulders while she dances to zar procession songs. The bride usually mounts larger animals such as sheep, goats, bovines and camels. In practice, a queasy, fearful or immobile bride is accommodated. She is spared the head balancing of birds or the mounting of a camel. Any symbolic gesture that conveys the same meaning instead will do: holding a chicken for a moment or two, or pulling the rope of the camel instead of mounting it.

As Fatma takes her lead-singer (rayessa) position facing the chorus, she inspects the scene; everything is in place ready for the ordeal. The noisy children have finally left the lobby to avoid possession. The animals, ritually purified--first with water and then with incense--are in position awaiting the song that calls on the spirit for whom each will be first paraded, and then sacrificed. Lit candles in
hand, the guests have gathered around Om Ashour, now standing with the help of her son. The musicians are facing Fatma, awaiting her signal to begin singing.

Tonight's spirit procession songs are calling on the Grand Lady and members of her pantheon. They are vocal call and response, non-instrumental pieces in Rotana with occasional Arabic expressions performed in an Africanized accent. Rotana is the language of zar, which is said to be in an African language (Sudani). None of us understand it, not even the singers themselves. Occasional clapping to the rhythms accompanies some of the vocalization.

Commanding the attention of the gathering, Karima delivers another:

"PRAY BY THE PROPHET!"

Her face covered completely with her tarha, Om Ashour holds the ewe, ready to sway her upper body while Fatma softly sings first to Rora—one of the Grand Lady's seven manifestations—and the chorus repeats mostly the same line after her.39

_Rora daniniya Rora we inak man zawa_

Sabah calls for nuqta: "Dayman ya habayeb, ya habayebha"

_Rora daniniya Rora we inak man zawa_

Fatma repeats the call for nuqta over the chorus voice: "Dayman ya habayeb." Money pours in, while she and the chorus continue their call and response singing to Rora. Standing next to his mother, Ossama circles Om Ashour's head with a twenty-pound note to honor her, and then hands it to

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39 I only included Fatma's lines. The response of the chorus is only included when differing from Fatma's call.
Sabah. The latter grabs each note from the habayeb (family members and friends) and in turn circles each note around Om Ashour's head.

As Karima and the other musicians sing, their eyes follow Sabah's movements attentively as she crumples each note in the palm of her hand and puts it in a communal cloth bag. This monitoring guarantees that Sabah does not keep any of the money for herself. The money collected in nuqta in the bag throughout the night is divided equally among the musicians later on.

Fatma:  
*Rora metakina Rora we inak man zawa*

Chorus:  
*Rora daniniya Rora we inak man zawa*

Now Fatma sings to Baba Kiri, a member of the Grand Mistress's pantheon.

Dawan Dawa Baba Kiri
Dawan Dawa Shekerwa (twice)
Helema gana kaka sar

Om Ashour's limited movement is taken into account. Instead of mounting the ewe like she used to do in her youth, today she holds it by its strap and pets it occasionally. Instead of dancing to and fro in the lobby, she stands in place with the help of her son. She is swinging her upper body to the left and to the right, bowing her head to the rhythms and flinging her elbows in the air.

When the call for Baba Kiri comes to a halt, the black ewe is moved to the back of the lobby. Now they are switching to the chickens' parade. Karima uses this opportunity to call again for nuqta: "Dayman, Dayman ya habayebha."

With each note, Karima replies in a grateful tone "Dayman ya habibti"40

40 The call for *nuqta "Dayman ya habayebha"* is always in a different tone of voice than *dayman* when it is used as a thank you for *nuqta.*
Concerned about messing up the lobby, which might result in frictions with neighbors, Om Ashour shouts to the person carrying the basin with the dirty water away from under her feet: “Take care. . . Don’t spill the water.” Azza hands in one of the two red chickens to Om Ashour. The singing, in call and repeated response, resumes. This time the song is to Badi Shawra, Adama, Osseh and Mariyam, who are also members of the Grand Mistress’s pantheon:

Fatma:  
*Ina ya Badi Shawra*
*Shida Badi Shawra*
*Badi Shawra digwa*
*Badi Shawra gamgama*
*Adama laleih Osseh Mariyam*
*Adama maydoussi ya Maryam*

Chorus:  
*Adama laleih*
*Osseh Mariyam*
*Osseh Adama*
*Osseh Maryam*

Fatma and the chorus sing together to Bang Dada without stopping:

_Ah yo yo yo yo_  
_Bang Dada shalu yeh ye yeh_  
_Bang Dada shalu_  
_Bang Dada fil ada_  
_Bang Dada shalu yeh ye ye_  
_Bang Dada shalu_

For a short moment the singing stops. Om Ashour is handed another red chicken. The musicians resume with a song to Hakim Basha, the Physician (*il-doctor*) and the Grand Mistress’s son.

Fatma:  
_Hakim Basha baba ya rare_

Chorus:  
_Ya rare baba rayma_

Fatma starts clapping:
Rare sake rayma

Chorus: Rare baba rayma

Fatma: Hakim Basha baba ya rare

Chorus joins clapping:

Rare Baba rayma

Ululations

Fatma: Hakim Basha baba ya rare (three times)

Chorus: Rare baba rayma

Ululations

Fatma: Hakim Basha baba ya rare

Chorus: Rare baba rayma

Without stopping they continue singing and clapping. They are calling on Sambo--another manifestation of Hakim Basha. Om Ashour's trance is underways signaled by the type changes in facial expressions associated with possession trance (it'akaret). The chicken doesn't refrain from clucking the whole time it is in Om Ashour's hand.

We da zanb laleih Sambo bikerker sha shalu (four times)

They shift the singing to an Africanized Arabic:

Sambo possesses him and Sambo possesses him ⁴¹

Fatma: Sambo possesses him, Hakim Basha

Chorus: Sambo possesses him and Sambo possesses him

Fatma: Sambo possesses him, they lit your candles

⁴¹ The switching of gender is an idiom indicating a foreign language
Chorus:  Sambo possesses him and Sambo possesses him
Fatma:  Sambo possesses him and the Masters possess him
Chorus:  Sambo possesses him and Sambo possesses him
Fatma:  Sambo possesses him
Chorus:  Sambo possesses him
Fatma:  Hakim Basha
       Hakim Basha
Chorus:  Sambo possesses him
Fatma:  O Sambo (twice)
Chorus:  O Sambo

Ululations

They stop singing. Karima asks Azza to take the red chicken from Om Ashour and to give her the pair of black rabbits. A male and a female rabbit will be sacrificed for Gado and his wife Maryouma in the bathroom upstairs in the apartment later on tonight. They resume singing now in Egyptian Arabic.

Fatma:  All this is for the Nigerian
Chorus:  The Nigerian Gado
Fatma:  Welcome. O Nigerian
Chorus:  Ah ya Gado Ah. O Gado
Fatma:  Candles are lit for you. O Nigerian
Chorus:  Gado the Nigerian
Fatma:  You are the head of the family. O Nigerian
Chorus:  Ah O Gado

157
Fatma: O Welcome to you. O Nigerian
Chorus: Gado the Nigerian
Fatma: Real (unclear word) for the Nigerian
Chorus: Gado the Nigerian
Fatma: You are the head of the family. O Nigerian
Chorus: Baba Gado
Fatma: O He is welcomed this Nigerian
Chorus: Ah O Gado
Fatma: Ah O Gado (twice)
Chorus: Ah O Gado

Then still clapping, they sing to Gado’s wife Meram or Maryouma without stopping.

Fatma: O Meram, wife of Gado, Ah O Meram, wife of Gado
Chorus: Ah O Meram, wife of Gado O Maryouma, wife of Gado
Fatma: I am Maryoum, wife of Gado O Maryoum wife of Gado
Chorus: I am Maryoum, wife of Gado, O Maryouma wife of Gado

Karima asks the audience to clap along

Fatma: Wife of Gado (twice)
Chorus: Wife of Gado

Om Ashour falls back on the chair behind her, exhausted.
The Rite of the Sacrifice

With the spirits summoned, the animal sacrificed and Om Ashour anointed with the blood of the spirit offering, this phase of ritual ends. The crowd that had gathered in the lobby of the stairwell disperses in different directions. With the help of a neighbor, the women of Om Ashour’s household carry the slaughtered ewe upstairs to the apartment to prepare for tonight’s meal and prepare tea for the guests. A ewe broth with pieces of meat and rice will be cooked for Om Ashour’s cure. The rest will be kept in the freezer. She is to feed only on sacrificial meat during the coming seven days—her days of seclusion. The rabbits of Gado are put back in their crate and taken upstairs awaiting their turn in sacrifice. It would take place later on tonight in the bathroom upstairs. As part of the expected payment for officiating the sacrificial rite, a quarter of the ewe is given to Karima. For now, the ‘sheikha’s share’ is to remain in the refrigerator until daybreak, when it is time for the sheikha to go home. The guests go back to their seats in the alley. The musicians are ready for their break. We walk together towards the corner in the alley designated for the musicians.

4. The Mayanga: the Cemetery of the Spirits

Only serious long-term members with a history of multiple initiations and an aspiration to advance in ritual hierarchy build mayangas. The word mayanga is another Hausa word which means cemetery (Besmer 1983). In the zar parlance of Cairo, a mayanga is a special kind of grave and a private shrine where the remains of animals sacrificed for any family member are buried. It is a
place where a zar devotee may harbor her possessing spirits, and thus acquire
direct access to them. It acts as an axis mundi, bringing the cosmic world of the
particular spirits into the local residential domain of a devotee. This proximity to
one’s spirit domain confers greater powers to a seasoned zar member:
divinations and success in any endeavor, the so-called ‘open path.’

A mayanga has potency that needs to be ritually renewed with a constant
supply of sacrificial blood, bones, and skin. Some mayangas remain active even
after their owners die. A taxi driver once told me about the mayanga of his next-
door neighbor—a zar leader who is long dead—which emits the smell of incense
every Tuesday, the day of her weekly gathering (hadra). Om Ashour’s mayanga
contains the traces of blood, and the bones of all the animals that she and her
deceased husband had sacrificed for their own zar spirits since they had moved
to this building at their marriage almost 40 years ago.

5. Conclusion

The different zar rites included in this chapter have by no means
exhausted all the rituals performed in zar. I have presented this sampler of rituals
here to give the reader a sense of the complexity and intensity of zar in ritual
performance and to show how bodies are localized in space that connects such
bodies to a supernatural cosmology through rituals. The performance of the rite
of Openings using the Fatiha along incense is intended to open one’s path (tariq)
though the ritual mediation of a cosmology of immanent beings that include God,
the prophets, the saints and the spirits. Animal sacrifice is an offering intended to
take the place of the offering of one's self (fadîy) implying the asking for forgiveness and absolution ('afûw wil samah) from the spirits who are seen as part and parcel of the Sublime and inseparable component of a divine unseen and perhaps occult universe. The blood of the sacrificial animal binds the initiand to her spirit and to a group of like minded persons who participate in the zar social world.
CHAPTER VII

SAINTS AND SPIRITS: TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONS

1. Introduction

Egyptian zar has interested travelers and scholars for more than 150 years. However, prior to this study, no ethnographic work on change within zar tradition or the forms in which such changes have been articulated has been carried out. Early studies looked at zar as cultural survival (cf. Frobenius 1913; Seligman 1914; Gordon 1929), or as material culture (Kriss & Krisss-Heinrich 1962; Bachinger & Schienerl 1984; Kruk 1993). More recent studies have dealt with zar as theatrical performance (El-Eleimy 1993), and as resistance to structural inequalities (Morsy 1993). Studies on Egyptian zar also overlooked its capacity to absorb and adapt to changing social conditions, and its continuous hybridization and re-invention of itself as a response to changing times. The only exception among the scholars who worked on zar in Egypt is Richard Natvig (1987). In his article on the history of Egyptian zar, he suggested a dynamic feature to zar. Following Natvig's insights, my observations show that zar is infinitely malleable and highly improvisational. The most interesting aspect of zar comes from the fact that it is marked by a great deal of flexibility in borrowing from and merging with other meaningful practices. Zar is a bricolage (Levi-
Strauss 1966; Comaroff 1985; Boddy 1989) of signs and symbols that are continuously varying to remain meaningful in response to changing times.

This chapter consists of two parts, the first is a discussion of the meaning enacted (Rappaport 1999) by a song dedicated to Hassan Abul Gheit, the patron saint of the Gheitaniya zar musicians. Following Connerton (1989), I discuss the song as an ‘act of transfer’ commemorating the history of a marginal Sufi movement that took place in Egypt during the nineteenth century. Connerton suggests new ways to retrieve the cultural memories of those whose voices went unheard by framing commemorative rituals as ‘acts of transfer’. Connerton’s focus is on ‘non-inscriptive’ practices transferred in commemorative rituals such as zar songs. I use Connerton’s concepts to analyze the song dedicated to the Saint Hassan Abul Gheit.

In the second part of this chapter, I examine changes in the articulation of possession by the most popular spirit pair in Cairo. I discuss old and new ritual forms articulating the possession of the most popular spirits in Cairo. These forms are practiced side by side in Cairo. I argue that as society and culture changes in response to global, regional and local economic and social transformations, these changes are absorbed and taken in to zar. In particular, I use the examples of changes that are associated with the articulation of the spirits: Yawra Bey and Rakusha Hanem. I discuss how these forms signify different aspects of the elite identity of this golden pair. I argue that some of the changes associated with articulation of possession of Yawra and Rakusha, as expressed in song, spirit paraphernalia, and/or dance, are only changes in form
or in signifying symbols and not in essential meaning. These changes not only reflect transformations in Egyptian society as a whole, but also constitute the response of zar as a genre of popular culture to global socio-economic conditions and forces.

About Zar Songs

In this section I would like to remind my readers about the role of songs and music in zar. Zar songs and music are performed in two ritual arenas: in the hadra or weekly gathering, and in the public zar initiation ceremonies. The first arena is a weekly gathering hosted in a special room in the home of a zar ritual leader. While sometimes zar initiations with sacrifice and music are hosted in the hadra room on a different day, or time, the weekly ritual activities are limited to the musical part of spirit placation process. In the weekly gathering, possession dances, which are mostly trance dances, are mainly intended to temporarily appease the spirits. For those whose afflicting spirits have not yet been identified, attending the weekly gathering and listening to songs invoking the spirits may also reveal or confirm the spirits' identity. The zar leader and musicians monitor the slightest response of a novice to different tunes and attempt to lure her or him to the dancing arena. Today, attending the weekly gathering is the most popular form of public participation in zar.

Songs are instruments of healing in zar because of their potential to communicate with, and mobilize the power of, different groups of supernatural beings. These are literally called into action through ritual singing (Austin 1962).
The response of the devotees is usually expressed in mood swings labeled *ta'kira*. Such a mood is usually followed by a special kind of religious dancing called *tafqir* that leads to trance. As I have mentioned before, not all trances performed in *zar* are possession trances. *Zar* devotees who experience trance while dancing *zikr* (remembrance) in response to a song that praises the prophet Mohamed or most of the saints are by definition in direct communion with such supernatural beings (Rouget 1985). The spirits of those eminent beings are present but they do not possess the dancing devotees. Only *zar* spirits possess devotees.

2. *Zar* Songs as ‘Acts of Transfer’

Some *zar* songs may be interpreted as ‘acts of transfer,’ as a kind of history that a community performs to remind itself about its own identity against forgetting. In *How Societies Remember*, Connerton (1989) draws our attention to social memory as a dimension of political power. He develops a theory about the ways by which the memory of groups is conveyed and sustained by expanding a hermeneutic interpretation from texts to bodies (1989:1). Connerton argues that people’s struggle against forced forgetting is a struggle for memory. Under such conditions, the record, of what he calls oppositional histories, “preserves the memory of social groups whose voice would otherwise have been silenced” (1989:15).

Social memory can thus be found in commemorative ceremonies such as *zar* songs. Connerton would describe such commemorative ceremonies as
performative habits (1989: 4-5). Connerton approaches ritual not as a type of symbolic representation, but as a species of the performative. He views commemorative rituals as the re-enactment of other actions that are represented as prototypical; what is being remembered in commemorative ceremonies is the community's identity (1989: 70). "Performative utterances are as it were the place in which the community is constituted and recalls to itself the fact of its constitution" (1989: 59).

Part of what Connerton calls the 'historical deposit' is to be found in repeated commemorative acts and in culturally specific bodily practices (1989: 12). Images and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances (1989: 3-4). Accordingly, commemorative rituals and bodily practices may operate as 'acts of transfer.' They allow us a glimpse of the past sustained and conveyed by performance. It is these 'acts of transfer' that make remembering in common possible (1989: 39-40). Connerton writes,

[R]ites are expressive acts only by virtue of their conspicuous regularity. They are formalized acts, and tend to be stylised, stereotyped and repetitive. Because they are deliberately stylised they are not subject of spontaneous variation, or at least are susceptible of variation only within strict limits (1989: 44).

Although demarcated in time and space, rites, such as those in zar, are porous. Zar songs are meaningful because they have significance in relation to a set of further non-ritual actions, and to the whole life of a community (1989: 45). Images of the past—for example, images of the harem system, the indirect indexing of slavery, and references to the struggle of marginalized Sufis such as
the Gheitaniya against the ruling power—are but few examples that were transferred in zar song performances.

Following Bakhtin, Connerton suggests the possibility of interpreting religious rituals, and particularly the carnavalesque, as 'anticipative representations.' Connerton argues that the inversions of hierarchic order characteristic of carnival are to be read as mechanisms of social liberation in which the device of symbolic representation is used as leverage. In this view, carnival is an act in which ‘the people’ organize themselves ‘in their own way’ as a collectivity in which the individual members become an inseparable part of the group (1989: 50).

From the historical position in which rites, such as those constitutive of zar practices, are invented traditions susceptible to a change in their meaning, Connerton writes,

This thought has prompted the attempt to rediscover the meaning of ceremonials by resituating them in their historical context. On this view, to set a rite in its context is seen not as an auxiliary step but as an essential ingredient to the act of interpreting it; to investigate the context of a rite is not just to study additional information about it, but to put ourselves in a position to have a greater understanding of its meaning than would be accessible to someone who read it as a self-contained symbolic text (1989: 50).

In this chapter, I am arguing following Connerton (1989) that some zar songs may be viewed as 'acts of transfer' that preserve the identity of tayfet il-zar. My interest is to understand songs beyond their boundaries set within the self-contained symbolic texts. In the following section, I examine the context of a zar song dedicated to the saint Hassan Abul Gheit, the patron saint of the

167
Gheitaniya zar troupe and song. I argue that what is being remembered in this 'act of transfer' is the Gheitaniya community's own identity (1989:76). The song expresses the Ghetaniya's 'oppositional history' to the state with regards to the military draft (1989:15).

3. The Historical Context of the Abul Gheit Song

During the nineteenth century, Egypt underwent traumatic transitions that affected the everyday lives of the rural and urban poor. Many of these changes were the direct result of the reorganization of the modern Egyptian state under Mohamed Ali and his heirs. New measures of control and technologies of power and administration were introduced to serve the expansionist agenda of the Egyptian state, and to insure its control over its subjects.

Recent historical scholarship indicates that the restructuring of the Egyptian state in the nineteenth century had negative effects on the Egyptian population (Fahmy 1996). Peasants were drafted into the army for the first time, and the state reorganized and controlled the Sufi orders (De Jong 1978). These changes created considerable resentment and dissent particularly among the rural populations. Much needed labor was taken away from peasant subsistence and diverted to service the Egyptian state and its expansionist and modernizing agenda.

Court records from this period documented violent and criminal activity, but there was little recording of non-violent resistance. As a result, memories of symbolic dissent or what Scott (1990) has called 'hidden transcript' are rarely
directly included in the historical archives, and thus are absent from conventional historical reconstruction.

Paul Connerton argues that ‘non-inscribed’ practices are transmitted in and as traditions such as zar spirit possession. Following Connerton’s lead, Paul Stoller (1994) has examined Hauka spirit possession in Niger as an embodiment of colonial memories, while G. P. Makris (1994;1996) has demonstrated that zar Tambura songs embody images of the traumatic events that followed the rise and the fall of the Mahdi in the Sudan.

Makris has analyzed twenty-one zar tambura songs among devotees in Om Dorman in the Sudan. He has argued convincingly that zar tambura is a kind of history and its practices encompass a commentary on the Mahdi wars at the end of the nineteenth century. This was a brutal war waged by the Anglo-Egyptian forces partly to end slavery in the Sudan. The reproduction of these songs in ritual confirms the identity of the devotees and musicians, who are not only of slave descent and identify themselves as the “original” people of the Sudan, but also took a position in the conflict in opposition to the Mahdi (Makris 1994, 1996).

4. Cultural Memories

In the following, I examine cultural memories as traced in ‘images’ and ‘recollected knowledge’ of the past as performed in a zar spirit possession song and in the traditions of the Gheitaniya zar musicians in Cairo. Following Connerton, Stoller and Makris, in this section I focus on the cultural memories of
a marginal Sufi movement which originated in the nineteenth century by examining a commemorative zar song. I argue that despite their legendary undertone, the ritual song, lore and bodily practices that commemorate Hassan Abul Gheit, the patron saint of the Gheitaniya zar musicians, transfer cultural memories of opposition to the state during the nineteenth century. By placing the transferred ‘images’ and ‘recollected knowledge’ in their historical context, one can discern the cultural memories from some of their legendary characteristics.

The Ghetandiya, followers of the spiritual ways established by Hassan Abul Gheit, are one of these specialized groups of zar musicians. I was told that the group originally specialized mainly in Muslim saint zikr songs, long before they were engaged in zar in the 1940s. The Ghetandiya singers consolidated their own Sufi ritual singing tradition with that of zar.

Zar song and ritual performances reveal a popular Islamic Sufi conception of the world. The performances express devotion to several interconnected and overlapping constellations of supernatural beings, which have the power to affect the everyday lives of humans and to grant healing and prosperity. At the pinnacle of this universe is God. Just below him are the prophets. This conception also includes local Muslim and Christian saints and zar/djinns.

Muslim saints or awliya are friends of God who mediate between Him and their human seekers. They live as spirits (arwah) in a separate universe, al-barzakh, and communicate with human beings through dreams, visions, and trance. The most powerful saints of this universe are the four pillars (al-aqtab al-arba’a), which are conceptualized as supporting heaven and the Divine Throne.
They are also the founders of the most politically powerful Sufi orders in Egypt. Minor Sufi orders trace their spiritual genealogy through spiritual chains of succession that usually stem from one of these pillars.

Among the zar repertoire of saints, Hassan Abul Gheit is exceptional. Not only is he the patron saint of the Gheitaniya zar musicians but he is one of the few holy men who had not been tutored by a Sufi master. Thus Hassan had no particular allegiance to any particular master's way. Abul Gheit did not belong to any particular Sufi order. In fact the Gheitaniya way is a synthesis of the four main Sufi ways mentioned above. Unlike the saints who are descendants of the prophet Mohamed and who inherit their spiritual power through this sacred bloodline, he was not endowed with any innate spiritual power. He was an ordinary peasant dervish who became a champion (al-batal) because he resisted army discipline and the power of the Khedive through his enchanting zikr and the state reorganization of the Sufi orders by refusing to belong to any particular order.

According to the above zar song dedicated to Hassan Abu Attallah Abu Gheit and the lore of the Gheitaniya, one day as he was going to work in his field, he found a naked body floating in the river. The body belonged to a woman who had been murdered. He took the body out of the river, removed his outer garment and covered her. Hassan buried her in his field and protected the grave from wild animals for three days. On the third day, God blessed him with His Divine Protection (al-`inaya rabaniya) and he became a holy man—a friend of
God (wali). He was named Abul Gheit or El Gheitani after the place where he received God's Protection—*gheit* means agricultural field in Arabic.

After that incident, Hassan Abul Gheit began to have a large following. His miraculous gift and supernatural ability was playing enchanting religious tunes on his flute. Every time he played his *zikr* tunes, those who listened were caught in trance—nobody could resist Hassan's mesmerizing tunes. As they danced this remembrance to God, even the corn in the field would sway. Following his tradition, the Gheitaniya musicians still play enchanting tunes that lead *zar* devotees into certain trance.
Illustration 12. The Ghetaniya musicians leading a zar devotee into trance.

By 1827, poor Egyptian peasants from Lower Egypt were taken by force as draftees to the Egyptian Army, which was fighting wars under the Ottoman flag. This was the first time in a thousand years that the rank and file of the Egyptian Army consisted of freeborn Egyptian peasants rather than white or black slaves. The historian Khaled Fahmi (1997) studied this transition in the Egyptian army during the first part of the nineteenth century, analyzing the traumatic effect that the draft had on peasants and their families. Many peasants mutilated
themselves to dodge the draft, and others were court marshaled in large numbers for fleeing and resisting army discipline.

The traditions of the Gheitaniya may be seen as 'acts of transfer' that preserve the cultural memory of this antagonism to army discipline. The song depicts the Sufi corporal discipline of zikr as an opposition to army discipline. It also locates the power of communion with God in its cosmological place, above the hold of army drills on peasant bodies. When Hassan Abul Gheit was drafted into the army, instead of joining the army's drills, he played his flute. Everybody around him, even the officers, followed him into zikr, swaying as they became entranced into communion with God.

According to the Gheitaniya lore, the Khedive of Egypt heard about Hassan Abul Gheit's contrary actions when he was drafted in the army, and ordered Hassan's imprisonment. Every time he was locked up, he was miraculously found outside his cell, still playing his flute to zikr tunes. Miraculous escape from prison cells is a motif of sainthood and a further sign of Hassan's status as a friend of God. Exasperated, the Khedive ordered his death by drowning. The Khedive's men tied Hassan to a large heavy stone and threw him into the river. The heavy stone did not sink, but floated in the river carrying him while he played his zikr singing: "Who can make it difficult for me, I am the Ghitani, Abu Atallah my God blessed me." The narrative of the legend is resolved poetically with the Khedive giving up on his punishment and offering Hassan Abul Gheit and his followers the islands in the branches of the Nile delta to inhabit.
By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Egyptian state had succeeded in reorganizing the Sufi orders. Historians contend that the state attempt to control the orders was partly because they had proved themselves very powerful in mobilizing the population of Cairo against the ruler chosen by the Ottoman Porte for Egypt and replacing him with Mohamed Ali in 1805. Contrary to the demands of the state, the mystical teachings of Hassan Abu Atallah Abul Gheit did not follow any specific Sufi order or sheikh. Rather, he was the beloved of the four Egyptian Sufi pillars: Ahmed El Rifayi, Al-Sayed Ahmed El Badawi, Ibrahim El Desouki and Abdel Kader El Gilani. Until recently, the Ghitania musicians kept their hair very long following the Rifa‘i, and wore a combination of colors: red, white, green and black, representing each of these four pillars.

As we have seen from the example of the song dedicated to Hassan Abul Gheit, the narrative of the heroic story of the Sufi Hassan Abul Gheit is transferred as knowledge to the zar community during zar song performance. The song commemorates the actions of the champion hero Hassan Abul Gheit who resisted the draft and protected the innocent. At the same time, the performance of the song recalls the constitutive moment of the Ghetaniya community, the history of their identity and locates the Gheitaniya in history.

5. The Golden Pair

In Egypt, zar spirits are always ritually placated in pairs, each consisting of a male and a female. In the Upper Egyptian zar variant practiced in Cairo, these pairs are all brothers and sisters. But Yawra Bey, who is not considered part of
the Upper Egyptian zar pantheon or tradition, is paired with his daughter Rakusha Hanem. As is typical in zar, the pair is ritually placated together. A song for Yawra is usually followed by another for Rakusha. A reconciliation ceremony for Yawra is always also for Rakusha. If a possessed person exhibits only possession symptoms of one spirit and not the other, he or she is still considered possessed by both Yawra and Rakusha. In such a case the possessed is required to sacrifice and fulfill the demands associated with both spirits.

I chose to call the two spirits ‘the golden pair’ not only because they represent elite status, but also because one of Yawra’s main paraphernalia is a gilded European style high chair, a symbol of the power of Egyptian royalty and the associated aesthetic hegemony of European rococo style during the second half of nineteenth century and first half of twentieth century. Yawra’s gilded chair signifies the state, the ruling powers and elite status.

The existence of the golden pair has been documented in the zar practices of Cairo since the early 1900s (Hilmi 1903). They are also known to zar devotees in Alexandria, Cairo and in many parts of Sudan (Constantinides 1972) but not in Lower Egypt, Upper Egypt or Fayoum. They have also been documented for the Ottoman Empire in the latest part of the nineteenth century (Hunswick and Powell 2002:160-1).

Today, the most common type of zar initiation in Cairo is called Buffet Yawra: an evening of zar celebration and reconciliation rituals dedicated mainly to Yawra and his daughter Rakusha. There are very few initiates who have not suffered from Yawra and/or his daughter’s possession.
Because of their popularity, the golden pair is invoked through zar ritual songs by all three practicing musical bands in Cairo. The songs calling on Yawra and Rakusha are the most popular and most frequently performed in all the zar weekly gatherings I have seen.

Illustration 13. Om Hassan hosting the spirit of Yawra Bey
Illustration 14. Yawra in full possession-trance
Illustration 15. Yawra’s pear-shaped amulet

Yawra Bey

Yawra Bey is portrayed in songs, represented in and by paraphernalia and in everyday language as a handsome, dark-skinned (asmar) Ottoman gentleman, a military officer in the nineteenth century Egyptian Army, wearing a red fez and a red sash (See for example illustrations 15 and 16). The name Yawra is never used for humans in Egypt. It is derived from an Ottoman army rank, yawr which
corresponds to an *aide de camp*. Yawra is a dandy, a gentleman and a real playboy known to seduce young and attractive girls by possessing them.

Illustration 16. Yawra’s *zar* disc amulet

Yawra’s possession troubles are associated with marriage. Typically, Yawra falls in love with a teenage girl, preventing her from marrying until he is placated in ritual as we have seen in the case of Rasha in chapter five. *Zar* people say: “Yawra makes her suitors see her as ugly, and make her think that her suitors are unacceptable.”

Marital problems, sexual aversion to husbands, and homosexuality are also attributed to him. The relationship between the spirit Yawra and his human
host is described in zar songs sometimes as passion. The phrase "I have passion for you, O Yawra" (shuqi 'aleik ya yawra) is a common refrain in zar songs dedicated to Yawra. On other occasions, such fondness of the spirit by its human host is also expressed in song as love (hub). It is interesting to note that such direct reference to passion or love is never used to describe how a devotee feels about her possessing spirit in everyday life. Instead girls and women that I have known talk only about being subjects of Yawra own love, passion and jealousy. Moreover, the expression of a desire or craving for a black baby in the case of a married woman in everyday discourse is also an idiom of possession by Yawra. Such expression of love is only permissible indirectly as articulated in songs or signified in a desire for a dark-skinned baby.

Yawra is signified through his paraphernalia. He loves to smoke either a water pipe or cigarettes. He also likes the smell of perfumes. During the performance of Yawra’s trance dances, the devotees smoke cigarettes and sprinkle themselves and the audience with western style perfume. Yawra’s altar may also include a miniature water pipe signifying his association with tobacco. Yawra is placated by gold or silver rings set with real red ruby or its glass or plastic imitations. The spirit’s favorite color is red which is not only signified by the red fez and the color of the ruby but also by the color of the sacrificial animals which are slaughtered to appease him. These sacrificial birds or animals are always red; a pair of red pigeons, a red sheep or a red bull is offered to placate Yawra (See DVD Clip 1 for an example of Yawra dance performed by a medium wearing the red fez and a sach while smoking a cigarette).
Rakusha Hanem

Rakusha Hanem is not an ordinary child, but a child of the elite. Rakusha is Yawra’s young daughter. She draws her mediums to luxury and to capricious cravings for expensive things such as silky pink clothing and gold jewelry. She loves candy and toys. Her toys’ paraphernalia include a black doll and a ball. Rakusha’s mediums sometimes dance in to trance while holding and playing with a doll or a ball.

Rakusha, as a little child who loves sweets, often speaks through her medium in a thin childlike voice demanding candy. In their daily lives, those possessed by Rakusha are often compelled to act like children, telling all and throwing tantrums over minor irritations, with little regard to the social consequence of their action. Rakusha’s color is pink; her ritual costumes are a pink dress and a scarf. The sacrifice offered to her is a speckled hen (*farkha rozzi*).

Rakusha’s elite status, or her childish and playful nature, always penetrates the personalities, actions and paraphernalia of her mediums. Rakusha’s possession is also articulated in different dance performances that range from trance, to collecting gifts of money, to belly dancing.

The altar set for Yawra and his daughter Rakusha is called Buffet Yawra. This ceremonial event takes place during one evening only. The “buffet” is a rectangular western style table covered with a table cloth and set with expensive fruits and food such as apples, cakes and sweets and usually decorated with
flowers, a water pipe, and Yawra's red fez.

6. The Military Spirit Pantheon

In Cairo, Yawra and Rakusha belong to the Harbiya (battalion) or Lewa (brigade) pantheon. The Lewa pantheon consists of seven masters or pashas. The golden pair is part of this military pantheon of the Sudani zar tradition. The word Sudani does not always mean Sudanese in Egyptian Arabic; it sometimes simply means African. In zar songs, the word Sudani is quite often used to describe the attributes of spirits who are also described as Nigerian or Abyssinian and as slaves (gariya for a female slave and walag (Abyssinian slave) or 'abd for a male slave). In essence, the Sudani tradition references Africa in the popular Egyptian imagination.

One can only speculate about the origin of this military pantheon. But it seems to have developed during the nineteenth century among members of the Sudanese battalion of the Egyptian Ottoman army. This battalion was composed mostly of freed black slaves captured during the nineteenth century who were often accompanied by their wives and children (Toledano 1998:56).

According to the oral histories that I heard during fieldwork, the Harbiya songs were originally played by all-women bands of slave descent. These bands have now completely disappeared from Cairo. Their style was called zar 'afnu. They sang in very distinctive zar style, almost like a military drill with simple lyrics that included rotana (foreign language) and African accents. One of their songs is called tabour ya basha tabour bara and references an army drill.
Other songs invoking the Harbiya pantheon are also played in tambura style by all bands. The harbiya Pashas are also part of is-sit il-kebira pantheon (the Grand Lady) discussed in chapter five. The ritual calling of the Grand lady is only performed by women. All three zar styles ‘afnu, tambura and the sit il kebira are also referred to zar Sudani.

7. Zar Music Bands and their Styles of Singing

Tambura Bands and Style

Illustration 17: Tambura or Sudani Band
The tambura or Sudani bands consist of a male leader called sangak who plays the tambura, an African lyre with five strings, one or two male dancers or suttariya and two female drummers. Members of these bands were migrants from the Sudan who settled in Egypt during Anglo-Egyptian rule. As they settled in Cairo, they passed their tambura music trade to their own children. At the same time, they also began to train the sons of both male and female musicians specialized in other zar styles.

Yawra and Rakusha Songs in Tambura Style

The Song Haye for Rakusha

The song Haye is a very popular and sung by all the three musical bands. Each band adds their own variation on the original rhythm. The lyrics that are characteristic of the ‘Afnu style and other Sudani traditions are very short and simple and sung with a pretend foreign accent and words. The song Haye simply calls on the spirit to make herself visible (see DVD clip 4). The song lyrics reads:

Haye O Haye
Come on O beautiful one
Come on O little deary
Salay Salay

The Upper Egyptian Pantheon and its Style of Singing

The Upper Egyptian (Sa’idi) band is usually composed of female musicians. They migrated from Upper Egypt to Cairo with their styles of zar
music and practices. With time, these bands have incorporated local women zar singers who have contributed their own zar singing traditions. Today this type of band is referred to as either zar masri (from Cairo) or zar saidi interchangeably. According to sheikha Karima, the zar leader, the old spirit, Ruminagdi of the Upper Egyptian pantheon is Yawra in the Sudani tradition. Ruminagdi’s color is green and his symbol is the crescent moon and the star. Both Ruminagdi and Yawra share the same attributes. Both spirits are warriors, dandies and womanizers. They both wear fezzes; only Ruminagdi’s fez is green and decorated with a golden crescent moon and star. This symbol was also that of the Egyptian national flag which was also green during the end of nineteenth century until the 1950s. Ruminagdi is usually also called in song along with his sister Marouma. Unlike Rakusha, Marouma is a full grown woman. Her favorite color is also green. She wears a green silk dress and a transparent green head cover. Pomegranates are offered to her. She loves gardens and parks.

Within this Upper Egyptian/Cairo tradition and musical style, Yawra is still called in ritual through a song called: O Yawra you are the moon why do you disappear (Yawra ya amar leih betkhtefi). Rakusha is called through a song called Hawanim Al-Habash (the Abyssinian ladies). I was told that both these songs originated in Cairo.

**Abul Gheit Band Members**

The Abul Gheit or Gheitaniya band members are all males. As already mentioned, they were originally only specialized in zikr, or Muslim saint songs,
and were introduced to the zar music of Cairo only in the 1940s. Today, the Abul Gheit bands consist of many of the descendants of Upper Egyptian, tambura, and those who played the extinct zar traditions, as well as rural folk musicians. The Gheitaniya musician I met during fieldwork are mostly the second or third generation of Gheitaniya musicians associated with zar music. Many of their children are already apprenticing in zar music tradition particularly when they fail they don’t do very well in school.

Each Gheitaniya band consists of a lead singer who plays the mazhar, a darabuka or dohola player, a flutist, at least two mazhar players and a professional dancer who holds the tora instrument (a pair of brass cymbals held in both hands like a castanets) and dances with devotees. Many bands include a large number of musicians who are mostly mazhar drum players. I have also seen bands with a fiddler or two flutes.

During the Gheitaniya association with zar music, they have adopted the most popular zar songs from all traditions to their instrumentation. They are particularly adept at the mixing of zar styles, putting on a great show; consequently, they are highly demanded by devotees and increasing in numbers. They are particularly well known for performing the most crowd pleasing version of the song “O Schoolgirls” discussed below (See DVD Clip 5).

8. The Hybridization and Transformation of Musical Styles

Early in the 20th century, each zar pantheon was strictly associated with specific zar musical traditions and bands. Each specialized band played very
different instruments, and had distinct rhythms and melodies. This stylistic specialization used to reflect different ethnic histories, local variations, and even perhaps different belief systems. An example of such variation in belief systems is the difference between zar originating in Hausa land and the Upper Egyptian zar originating most probably in Abyssinia. However, the last fifty years has witnessed a great deal of acceleration in zar music innovations, with mixing of musical styles and pantheons, particularly for the most popular spirits such as the golden pair. There has also been consolidation of zar musicians of disparate groups through marriage or business interests. Some spirits and zar musical bands, as mentioned before, have completely disappeared, such as the ‘afnu, the ‘arrussi and the rongo bands. Some of the descendants of those extinct bands and their most popular spirits with their songs, melodies and rhythms have been adopted by the surviving musical zar bands. Within the living memory of zar musicians in Cairo, specific melodies, rhythms and lyrics from one specialized zar musical tradition have been juxtaposed with other zar styles and sampled with non-zar music and songs popularized by mass media.

My research on zar song and music in Alexandria, Cairo, Fayoum and Sohag in Upper Egypt reveals that these different traditions have cross-fertilized during the last fifty years in metropolitan settings as migration, intermarriage, market pressures, and assimilation have broken down earlier social and ethnic boundaries among the musicians to produce hybrid genres of zar songs.
The Case of the Hybrid Genre: ‘Egyptianized Tambura’

One of these genres, here I call ‘Egyptianized tambura,’ is illustrated by part of a song performed by an Egyptian tambura band for the placation of Yawra.

Rakusha’s typical dance performance leads her mediums to trance. In the following video clip, Rakusha’s medium is gradually experiencing an intense trance in response to tunes of the song “schoolgirls” discussed below. Here the song is sung in a mixture of tambura and Upper Egyptian style (See DVD clip 2).

9. The History of the Song: Oh Girls of the Engineering School

A good example of such innovation and mixing of styles is a song called “O Girls of the Engineering school” or just simply “Schoolgirls.” The song “Schoolgirls” emerged in the 1950s perhaps as the Gheitaniya became more involved with zar. According to zar lore that I collected in Cairo, the song melody was borrowed from a popular non-zar Nubian wedding song. The zar musical bricoleur (Levi-Strauss 1962) matched the Nubian melody to a zar with Alexandrian rhythm popularized by the Gheitaniya and to new lyrics more relevant to zar and to transformations in Egyptian society concerning the education of girls. The lyrics of the song “Schoolgirls” also draws on an older zar song “Hawanim El Habash,” or the Abyssinian Ladies associated with Upper Egyptian/ Masri bands. The “Hawanim El Habash” song signifies the old harem system.
The new lyrics of the song “Schoolgirls” are elaborate in comparison with other older Rakusha songs like Haye mentioned earlier. It is performed in clear Cairene Arabic with no regional accents of any sort. The song reads:

Schoolgirls, hey pretty girl, hey teacher.
Ah. Hey girls of the Engineering School
Hey girls, this evening is the night of zar. Hey teachers,
Schoolgirls. She took her diploma and she is a teacher.

Girls girls girls how wonderful you are
Ah. Hey engineers.
Yes, you are beautiful. Hey instructor,
Schoolgirls. You are wearing the collar and the uniform
Play engineers. The night is a beautiful one. Hey teachers
Hey school girls. Play
Come on. Hey pretty teacher

School girls, I am a student in school
How wonderful you are. Hey teacher
Yes, schoolgirls you are as sweet as sugar candy.
Come on you pretty teacher
Yes you are a pretty teacher who took her diploma from school
She is a student and a teacher

Oh my beautiful roses
Hey pretty one, you are wearing pink,
Hey dark one, come near me
You are as beautiful as the moon
She is a beautiful and princely girl
If you are afraid of Yawra, hey clever one, I will manage Yawra

Play ladies (hawanim) while you stay awake all night
The mischief of the ladies, hey ladies, the ladies

O people where is he?
O people he is beautiful
O people he is my beloved

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[42] In zar, the original accent of the song is part of the song, so Upper Egyptian songs are sung with an attempt at an Upper Egyptian accent by the singers who were born and raised in Cairo.
The handsome one is me and my beloved is me
O Handsome Mambo and Mambo Kiriya

The Harem System

As mentioned before, Rakusha Hanem is a child of the elite. The image used in this song to portray Rakusha and to describe her attributes comes to us sampled from other zar songs. One such image is much older than the image of schoolgirls. It is drawn from the nineteenth century harem system, and depicts Rakusha as an idle Hanem who plays all night. Hanem is a form of address associated with elite women and female children and associated with the harem system of the nineteenth century. These women and children were pampered ladies of leisure, not expected to do strenuous physical work. In the harem, they became slave concubines, or wives of the male members of prominent families. Some of these female slaves were adopted as children and later married off to consolidate political and trade relations with other families. Rakusha Hanem’s old image is referencing a child of the harem.
From the Harem to Teacher College

With the abolition of slavery, the subsequent disappearance of the harem system, and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the roles of elite women were gradually transformed. The modern image associated with Rakusha redefined her social position in a manner reflecting the changed roles of elite women in Egyptian society during the twentieth century.

Rakusha's new image is that of a student going to school. She is wearing a collar and a pink school uniform. With an education Rakusha will become a teacher or an engineer. This image, however, reinforces her old harem and elite attributes particularly with regard to leisure and physical work. In Egypt, while still at school, girls are less likely to do as much strenuous physical labor or housework as their stay-at-home sisters. Thus we can see, how Rakusha's elite nature remains in the more recent version of the song, but with the
disappearance of the harem, a new elite female role, that of the schoolgirl, became the new reference.

The Theme of Play

As a female child spirit, Rakusha Hanem is the epitome of play. The ritual paraphernalia associated with this aspect of her identity consists of pink clothing, dolls, balls, miniature cookware, and playful jewelry, rings, bracelets and anklets with jingling miniature bells. More recently, the Western-style bracelet originally manufactured for the tourist market has become a favorite ritual item for her mediums. The intense desire to own such charm bracelet is an indication of possession by Rakusha. The charm bracelet is perceived by Egyptians as a “toy bracelet,” and is called as such. Despite its novelty, it articulates the old idea of play always associated with Rakusha’s identity. Again the incorporation of the charm bracelet reinforces the idea of zar as bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1962).

The theme of play is the essence of Rakusha, extending to the divinatory practice associated with her. If an initiate advances in the zar initiatory progressing and becomes a ritual specialist and a diviner, he or she does so with the aid of a particular zar spirit. Divination usually takes place via reading of the coffee cup, prayer beads, or dream interpretations. However, as expected following the symbolic logic of zar, those who divine through Rakusha do so through reading playing cards.

Rakusha’s elite identity is not directly articulated in dance performance, but rather in her pink paraphernalia. Another example of a medium possessed
by Rakusha is illustrated in DVD clip 3. The medium is gradually experiencing
trance in response to a tambura song called “O Rakusha.” The medium is
twenty-three years old. She is married and has a three-year-old son. She has
been possessed by a number of spirits, including Rakusha, since she was
twelve. The lyrics that are characteristic of this tambura style are very short and
simple, and sung with a slight foreign accent. The song simply welcomes the
spirit and describes her beauty.

As mentioned before, trance-dance is not the only manifestation of
possession. Zar possession is a permanent state which is not always visible.
Possession is experienced by the initiated mediums through different
articulations associated with a spirit character and attributes. For example,
Rakusha, as a little girl who loves sweets, often speaks through her medium in a
thin childlike voice, and asks for candy and toys.

Accordingly in their daily lives, those possessed by Rakusha are often
compelled to act like children by telling all, and by throwing tantrums over minor
irritations, with little regard to the social consequences of their actions. For
example, one of the Rakusha mediums I know, does not keep any secrets
because Rakusha’s childlike attribute has become part of her own everyday
personality.

In ritual space, a person possessed by Rakusha may also act as a child,
performing a non-trance dance while collecting money from guests in response
to the song Haye discussed earlier. Among adults of equal status, to keep face,
a person may only receive a gift if it is part of a system of reciprocal exchange.
This etiquette of reciprocity, however, does not apply to children. Children receive gifts of money from adults in their social world without shame. When Rakusha acts through her medium as a child, the adult medium is not ashamed to receive gifts of money from non-relatives. Some of the mediums I have seen give the collected money to the musicians after the song performance, perhaps to avoid shaming themselves.

In DVD clip 4 is an illustration of such Rakusha non-trance dance where the medium collecting money. The medium has just come out of an intense trance possessed by Yawra, Rakusha’s father. The medium is an old initiate who had many initiations and a long zar career. The song is played by the all-women Upper Egyptian Band.

Zar improvisation and hybridization is not only limited to song or paraphernalia. As Rakusha’s repertoire of jewelry was creatively extended to include new forms expressing aspects of the spirit playful identity in the example of ‘the toy bracelet’ discussed earlier, a new form of spirit dance performance has recently emerged.

The playful rhythms of Rakusha’s zar song “Schoolgirls” discussed earlier lend themselves to a generic style of belly dancing, and have increasingly inspired some of Rakusha’s young mediums to dance in this form.

The spread of this particular belly dancing style in Egyptian society is in itself a relatively new phenomenon, which coincides with the emergence and spread of visual mass media. Prior to the introduction of television in the 1960s, there were local variations of dancing styles for both men and women. These
have gradually disappeared, replaced by generic styles of belly dancing, initiating female professional belly dancers, and popularized by television and movies. As such, Rakusha’s mediums, like real Egyptian young girls, sometimes entertain the gathering in a zar ceremony with this generic belly dancing. Trance is yet to occur while belly dancing. Rakusha’s playfulness and youthfulness is still signified. DVD clip 5 is an example of such zar belly dancing. The song “Schoolgirls” is performed by the Abul Gheit all-male brand.

There are still a few older zar devotees who prefer Rakusha’s older songs such as “Haye” or the tambura song “O Rakusha” complaining that these new forms of song and dance are not true zar. In spite of their complaints, however, the festive performance is satisfying and entertaining to all its participants, even those who complain. This suggests that despite changes in forms and ritual details, the meaning remains the same. Zar people still say, “Zar likes farah,” which means that zar likes joyful celebrations.

10. Conclusion

The hybrid nature of zar and its capacity to continuously incorporate and absorb new and meaningful elements as well as to transform itself to adjust to changes in the wider Egyptian society is one of its basic characteristics. Zar is a

43 Professional belly dancers had developed this generic style from older forms of specialized dancing. These old forms of specialized dancing were structured by the ritual procession performances in weddings and were changed in order to meet the theatrical requirements of cabaret performance, and later on the film industry.
dynamic system of signs, symbols and practices. As a bricolage of signs, zar is continuously being tinkered with "whatever is at hand" from a limited universe of instruments to make do (Levi-Strauss 1962:16-17). Changes in zar forms and contents reflect transformations in Egyptian society as a whole and represent zar response as a genre of popular culture to global socio-economic conditions and forces.

In the realm of music and songs, the incidences of cross-fertilization between the different styles of zar such as Egyptian, Gheitaniya and tambura zar genres in Cairo are very widespread. All genres have cross-fertilized each other and have also been influenced by other non-zar singing genres popularized by the mass media: the Nubian wedding song we have seen is but one example. I have witnessed, sampling from religious songs popularized by the radio as well as songs made famous by Om Kalthoum, the most popular Arab singer that ever lived.

One cannot look at zar as a static phenomenon; zar forms and symbols, songs and paraphernalia are continuously changing to stay meaningful to the people who practice it. As people's perceptions, aspirations, knowledge, and material world change and transform so does the form, content of and symbols associated with zar.

In this monograph I demonstrated that one cannot know zar by reducing it to the functions it fulfills. If we limit zar to its role as a healing cult or as form of ethnopsychology or ethnotherapy (Fakhouri 1968; El Shamy 1972; Kennedy 1978), as a means to diffuse or redress grievances between men and women (Lewis
1967, 1971), or as silenced counterhegemonic text (Boddy 1989), we are confining zar to functional rational pigeon hole and we are becoming blind to multivocality and dynamism of zar. To perceive zar on its own terms, and not in monolithic functional terms entails capturing the experience of the participants and considering it as fluid, hybrid and dynamic system of material signs and symbols that reflect changes in people’s live and their historical conditions.

In this monograph, I have argued that zar is a mode of experience and a concept of reality that fulfills multiple, varied, and sometimes contradictory functions. I have not exhausted all the possibilities of interpreting zar but throughout the text, I have provided just a few interpretive possibilities. Zar is related to relationship between self and others at a variety of levels always centered on sacrifice. Elements of zar may be viewed as embodied or oppositional history and as acts of transfer (Connerton 1989) as we have seen in the case of the song of Hassan Abul Gheit. Other elements of zar, particularly its ritual, cyclical and processual forms produce locality and grounds devotee in time and space (Appadurai 1996). Zar incorporates women and men into a community of devotees that support them in their crises and in facing hard times. The process of zar incorporation also empowers adepts (particularly women) to deal with anxieties and hardships by listening and trusting their intuitive feelings and senses.

I have also argued that zar is experienced as embodied images of passions (Lienhardt 1961 and Kramer 1993). Zar guides the sincere devotees towards a sensuous epistemology and a moral orientation of their bodies in the world. It is an open, unbounded, and holistic path of knowing and a way of being in the world. Zar
provide the devotees with an experience of the Sublime stemming from the power of imagination (Wittgenstein 1979:7e). The spirits are experienced, not only in symptoms of afflictions, events, spaces, visions, dreams, cravings, intuitive feelings, and but more importantly, they are embodied experiences knowable only through the senses (hiss) in ritual sacrifices, zar music, and trance dances.

Zar experiences are varied and very personal. Each adept experiences her spirits in her own way and in many ways. The music and songs provide the devotees with a bodily technique (Mauss 1950) to exteriorize her sense of passiones through trance. When the zar music is played, the dancer is moved experientially to sense and know the spirit possessing her. The adepts experience their masters through their mimetic trance and non-trance dances, visions, dreams, ritualization in sacrifice, cravings and feelings. Zar rites and rituals socialize adepts into experiencing the Sublime. Zar ritual ways are techniques which teach the adept to experience one's gut feelings and to reestablishes contact with one's deepest self, opening one's way in the world and attracting prosperity by being generously active in the world.
APPENDIX I:
List of DVD Clips

1. Yawra Bey with fez
2. Trance: Banat al-handassa
3. Rakusha Tambura trance
4. Haye
5. Banat al-handassa Ghetani
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