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Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan: The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance

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# spirits and selves in Northern Sudan: the cultural therapeutics of possession and trance

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In Northern Arabic-speaking Sudan, numerous women—and very few men—are diagnosed to be suffering at some point in their lives from illness attributed to *zar*, a type of spirit possession. In Hofriyat, a village on the Nile some kilometers downstream from Khartoum, I found that in different years, 42 percent (1977) and 47 percent (1984) of women ever married and over the age of 15 have succumbed to this affliction.<sup>1</sup> Marital status is a significant factor in possession illness. *Zairan* (*zar* spirits), Hofriyati assert, rarely trouble themselves with the unwed—with women whose fertility has yet to be activated. Most affected are those between the ages of 35 and 55, among whom two-thirds acknowledge themselves to be possessed. The latter proportion is due to a cumulative effect: once possessed, a woman is always possessed thereafter.<sup>2</sup>

This paper offers an interpretation, grounded in the Hofriyati world, of the *zar* cult and women's participation in it. My concern is to avoid viewing possession phenomena in terms that, though our culture finds them accessible, are foreign to Hofriyati—whether biochemical reactions to nutritional deficiency (cf. Kehoe and Geletti 1981), or women's instrumental efforts to assuage their subordinate status by acquiring goods or garnering attention (cf. Lewis 1971, 1986). Such approaches may prove fruitful in assessing and translating specific cases of possession illness,<sup>3</sup> but since they neither account for possession forms, nor adequately credit the taken-for-grantedness of spirits in the everyday lives of the possessed, ultimately they distort and impoverish what they propose to understand. If the aim of the enterprise is to comprehend the scope of possession phenomena, to situate them in their cultural contexts, ethnographers must attend to their informants' experiences of possession and not seek merely to explain them away as something at once less dramatic and more clinical than they appear.

In what follows, I observe that, as others (for example, Bastide 1958; Crapanzano 1973, 1977, 1980; Lambek 1981, n.d.; Kapferer 1983; Kleinman 1980; Metraux 1959; Nelson 1971; Obeyesekere 1981) who have investigated such cults have found, spirit possession in Sudan is concerned with fundamental questions of identity and selfhood. Further, the preponderance of women among the possessed can be seen to derive from an interplay of factors, salient among them women's reproductive function as it is culturally constructed in Hofriyat. A major issue

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*Examination of cultural and social factors surrounding zar spirit possession diagnoses in Northern Sudan suggests that a major issue addressed by the cult is the cultural overdetermination of women's selfhood. Circumcision and infibulation operate to establish in women a sense of self congruent with the cultural image of woman as reproducer. When experiences and expectations fail to mesh, some women fall ill and are ultimately diagnosed as possessed. Through acceptance of the possession diagnosis and participation in curing rites involving trance, a patient is given scope to expand and regenerate her sense of self and recontextualize her experiences. [ethnomedicine, women, Sudan, spirit possession, the self, gender identity]*

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addressed by the *zar* is, I suggest, a problem of socialization: the cultural overdetermination of women's selves. And, although I agree that possession trance and ritual are legitimate psychotherapy, I would not stop short, as have others who pursue this approach (Bourguignon 1979:290–291; Kennedy 1967:191; Prince 1964:115), of acknowledging their potential to foster insightful reflection in the possessed. The province of *zar* is meaning, and it is best addressed in that light.

### **the cultural context: female selves**

Hofriyat is a village of some 500 Arabic-speaking Muslim residents and is similar in size, character, and composition to dozens of other farming settlements that cling to the Nile in the desert north of Khartoum. Hofriyat are loosely organized into a number of patrilineal, variably corporate, and putatively endogamous descent groups. Ideally, marriage takes place between patrilineal parallel cousins but in practice the majority of couples are close cognatic kin whose natal families reside in Hofriyat. The most important criterion of marriageability is that the families of prospective spouses be bound, prior to their wedding, by a thick net of moral obligation, the legacy of past intermarriages and generations of ramifying kinship. In Hofriyat, marriage is informed by an idiom or symbolic orientation I have elsewhere termed “interiority” (1982; in press): an inward focus, a concern for limiting social and physical openings, which constitutes a general organizing paradigm and aesthetic standard of Hofriyat culture. “Interiority” expresses the defensive orientation of the village, an orientation sustained, in part, by a history of invasion, colonization, and exploitation from without, and similar to the stance of other peoples living in precarious social and physical environments (cf. Faris 1972; Isbell 1978).

The idiom of interiority or defense underwrites a range of other customs (*ādāt*), significant among them the genital operation performed on female children known as pharaonic circumcision (excision of the labia and clitoris followed by almost complete infibulation: intentional occlusion of the vulva entailing obliteration of the vaginal meatus). According to villagers, this operation complements the procedure of removing the penile prepuce for Hofriyat boys and, like it, is performed between the ages of 5 and 10. Prepubescent circumcision accomplishes the social definition of a child's sex by removing physical traits deemed appropriate to his or her opposite: external genitalia in the case of females, the covering or “veil” of the penis in the case of males (cf. also Assaad 1980:4). The socially salient reproductive organ of the male is established as such when exposed, and that of the female—the womb—when covered and enclosed. Genital surgery ritually initiates the process of genderization, and implicitly identifies neophytes with their gender-appropriate spheres of operation as adults: the interiors of houseyards enclosed by high mud walls in the case of females; the outside world of farmlands, markets, other villages, and cities in the case of males. Females are associated with enclosure, with the maintenance of life within the village; males are associated with the precarious outside world, with political and economic life. Following their operations children begin to perform gender-specific tasks and are increasingly segregated from their counterparts.

Male and female in Hofriyat are thus defined, not only as physiological opposites, but as fundamentally different kinds of persons exhibiting complementary qualities, abilities, and dispositions (cf. Wikan 1980:43 for Egypt). To understand what is involved here requires us next to consider Hofriyat conceptualizations of the self. Villagers stipulate that all humans are composed of three vital essences: *rūh*, or breath, identified as the soul; *nafs*, or animal life-force, including lusts, desires, and emotions; and *'aqel*, or reason, rationality, the ability to control one's emotions and behave in socially appropriate ways. All living humans have breath or soul: its presence in the body is absolute; but *nafs* and *'aqel* are relative qualities, and men and women are thought to differ in the amounts of these that each is capable of developing (cf. Rosen 1978:567–568 for Morocco). Whereas men are thought to develop considerable *'aqel*

as they mature, the amount that women are able to develop is less. On this point women and men concur. But men go on to propose that women are wholly governed by their carnal natures and unable to exercise conscious restraint. In this lies a masculine explanation for the practice of pharaonic circumcision: the need to curb and socialize a woman's sexuality lest she should, even unwittingly, bring irreparable shame to her family through misbehavior.

To women circumcision has a different significance, for although it restrains their sexuality, this is not, they say, its purpose. The surgery, in that it is "hot" or "painful" (*ḥārr*), prepares a girl for womanhood; makes her body clean, smooth, and pure; renders her marriageable; confers on her the right to bear children; and invests her with fertility (cf. Boddy 1982).<sup>4</sup> Fertility and sexuality are, of course, two sides of the same coin, yet each sex emphasizes one more than the other. Both point to a fundamental concern in Hofriyat with human reproduction, the responsibility for which rests principally with women. Only when physically transformed and shaped to the image of human morality can they be entrusted to reproduce.

Women's susceptibility to possession is, I submit, closely bound up with the implications of pharaonic circumcision for a female child's developing self-perception and is, I will argue below, indicative of women's problematic, socially overdetermined selfhood. I suggest that through this operation and ancillary procedures<sup>5</sup> involving heat or pain—the two are equated here—appropriate feminine dispositions are being inculcated in young girls, dispositions which, following Bourdieu (1977:15), are embedded in their bodies not only physically, but also cognitively and emotionally, in the form of mental inclinations, "schemes of perception and thought." The trauma of pharaonic circumcision alone is insufficient to cultivate a prescriptively feminine self: such acts must also be meaningful to those who undergo and reproduce them. For villagers, meaning is carefully built up through metaphors and associations that operate implicitly and overtly to establish an identification of circumcised women with morally appropriate fertility, thence to orient them subjectively toward their all-important generative and transformative roles in Hofriyat society.

For example, in everyday conversations and interactions circumcised females are explicitly linked with certain types of birds because both are considered "pure."<sup>6</sup> Among domestic birds, pigeons are said to be pure (*tāhir*) and chickens dirty (*waskhān*). One reason the former are pure, I was told, is because they splash around in water that is set out for them. Their meat, referred to as *lahma nazīfa*—"clean flesh"—is a delicacy and pigeon broth a local panacea. By contrast, the flesh of chickens is considered filthy and almost never eaten, except by Hofriyat's nomadic neighbors and the very poor. Yet hens are kept by villagers because they produce eggs, which are, again, "clean food" (*ākil nazīf*). According to a local variant of the humoral theory of physiology, foods considered "clean" are said to "bring blood," to increase the amount of blood in the body.

Cleanliness, purity, and femininity are therefore linked with birds and certain fluids, notably water and blood. Water is associated with agricultural fertility and generativity, for Hofriyat is located on the Nile at the edge of the desert and food production depends on the river's annual inundation. Blood, on the other hand, is associated with human fertility: a woman's blood is considered the source of her fecundity, hence great care is taken to prevent its loss or misappropriation. The enclosure of her womb through circumcision is but one such procedure.<sup>7</sup>

Associations like these pervade daily life in Hofriyat. They implicitly yet continuously direct villagers' attention to what are culturally appropriate feminine characteristics. And in this process gender images are naturalized: they become part of the taken-for-granted world within which women's gender identities are reproduced and reaffirmed. To remain with the "bird" metaphor, unmarried women who dance at wedding parties are referred to as "pigeons going to market." They regard themselves as on display for prospective husbands, since it is usually at such affairs that arrangements for subsequent marriages are initiated. All women dance at these parties with a mincing, rhythmic forward step, their arms, draped with the cloth of their wraps, forming wing-like extensions to the sides. This, sometimes called the "pigeon dance"

(see also Cloudsley 1983:40, 54), involves moving the head to and fro, chin upturned and eyes rolled back, in the controlled manner of a courting pigeon walking along the ground. Also, until recently, people had the cheekbones of their daughters incised with a small scar or tattoo in the shape of a rounded “T,” called a “bird track” (*derab at-tēr*). It is said to resemble the footmarks of water birds on the beach and is considered a mark of beauty, one which enhances a woman’s desirability.

The metaphoric connection between circumcised, marriageable women and birds associated with water is strong. Both are *nazīf* or clean and identified with the blood of human fertility. Both domestic water-linked birds (pigeons) and women are pure—*tāhir*. Marriageable women are sometimes referred to as birds and in some cases said to act like birds. Further, the association is repeated by village men, who speak of having amassed sufficient funds to wed in terms of being able to “nest” (*‘aish*) a wife: to provide the materials she requires to remain within the houseyard, in the village, and raise a family.

Links between femininity, blood, purity, birds, and fertility are echoed in a variety of other situations. During my first field trip, Hofriyati sleeping rooms were decorated with ostrich eggshells suspended from the corner rafters. These objects, notable again for their association with birds, are thought to enhance the fertility of women who view them. They are prized for their shape, resistance, enclosedness, smooth rounded surfaces, and creamy white color.

Whiteness and enclosure are qualities normally associated with cleanliness, purity, and value. Foods that are white (for example, milk, sugar, white flour) are generally classed as “clean,” hence thought to bring blood. Earlier I noted that in Hofriyat a woman’s fertility is related to the quantity of blood she carries within her. Thus foods which “increase” the blood invigorate latent fertility or impart strength during pregnancy. And all must be obtained for women by men through men’s involvement in the outside world.

There is another group of foods considered “clean” and purchased for pregnant women. They include tinned fish, tinned jam, oranges, bananas, watermelon, and grapefruit, and are generally associated with Europeans, Egyptians, and Lebanese, that is, with people having light or, as villagers say, “white” complexions. The link to foreign groups is intriguing, since villagers generally consider the outside world to be an important locus of power. It is up to Hofriyati men to contain and harness this power, which, when brought into the household under appropriate conditions, positively contributes to the generative power of women. Such foods associated with the outside world are considered especially potent because they are all contained or enclosed, hence protected from dirt and dryness. The enclosedness, cleanliness, and imperviousness of valued edibles evoke images of the infibulated womb and of fecundity. And all of this is concentrated, if more crudely put, in the popular simile “a Sudanese girl is like a watermelon because there is no way in” (cf. Cloudsley 1983:118).

Objects described as “enclosing,” whether oranges, tins, or wombs, are deemed to contain moisture, and we are left once more with a connection between Hofriyati women and fluids. This is negatively expressed by the term for prostitute: *sharmūta*, which in local parlance contains a reference to meat that is cut in strips and hung to dry. The relation of dry to moist sets off the distinction between prostitutes and “brides,” hence, between female sexuality (inappropriate fertility) and female fertility (appropriate sexuality).

According to Hofriyati theories of conception, a fetus is formed from the union of a man’s semen, spoken of as his seed, with his wife’s uterine blood, the source of her fertility. Sexual intercourse causes the woman’s blood to thicken or coagulate and she ceases menstruation until after the baby’s birth: while pregnant a woman is said to nourish her husband’s future “crop” within her. Ideas about conception parallel those concerning parents’ respective contributions to the body of their child, who is said to receive its bones from its father and its flesh and blood from its mother.

In several other contexts fluids and moisture figure prominently as markers of femininity and potential fertility. The most obvious of these has to do with the division of labor by sex. While

cultivation is thought to be primarily men's work, fetching water from village wells for household consumption is ideally considered the women's task. Hence, through their individual labors, farming grain and getting water, men and women provide the household with materials for its staple food, *kisra*, a type of bread.

*Kisra* is made by first combining sorghum flour with an almost equal amount of water. The mixing is done by hand in a small rounded pottery container called a *gūlla*, designed to resist seepage. A cupful of batter is then spread thinly over an extremely hot seasoned griddle and left a few moments to bake; when the edges are crisp and dry the moist, crepe-like product is removed.

Now, the process of mixing and baking bread provides an implicit, though conceptually acknowledged metaphor<sup>8</sup> for the complementary roles of women and men in the reproductive domain: in the impervious *gūlla* the fruits of men's and women's labors are combined, but combined asymmetrically, in less than equal measure. The liquid mixture when transformed by heat produces bread, the staple food, that which sustains life. It is important to note that only women mix and bake *kisra*. Similarly, in the impervious womb are mixed a man's seed and a woman's blood: substance and fluid, like grain and water. This mixture, when transformed by the generative "heat" of the womb, reproduces human life, hence also sustains it. And of course only women can gestate and give birth.

Thus, the simple acts of getting water and baking bread, which girls begin to perform following their circumcisions, or even, perhaps, of peeling an orange, or opening a tin of fish, all are resonant with implicit meanings. They are metaphors both in thought and practice which, following Fernandez (1974), when predicated upon the inchoate self contribute to its identity. For in appropriating them, in enacting them, a girl or woman becomes an object to herself (1974:122). Such objectification must occur—by taking the view of the "other"—before she can become a subject to herself (1974:122). The metaphors predicated on female Hofriyati by themselves and others help to shape their dispositions, their orientations toward the world, their selfhood. They are the means by which women's subjective reality, closely governed by the cultural construction of womanhood, is—not merely expressed—but realized and maintained. The painful and traumatic experience of pharaonic circumcision first orients a woman toward a disposition and self-image compelled by her culture's values, and she is invited to relive that experience at various points in her life: vicariously, through participating in younger women's operations; actually, with her re-infibulation after each delivery; and metaphorically, with any procedure involving heat or pain, fluids, or other "feminine" qualities detailed above. Both in ritual and in many small moments throughout her working day, informative values are implicitly restated and her disposition reinforced.

Thus, women in Hofriyat are inexorably shaped by themselves and others into quintessential moral beings. Once infibulated and appropriately socialized, they reverse the original feminine situation, for they represent most completely the human triumph of *'aqel* over *nafs*, reason over animal life-force, or, inverting Ortner's formulation (1974), of culture over nature. With continuous monitoring, women become the embodiments of morality and local tradition.

This begs consideration of cross-gender contexts. If women are vested with the right and the obligation to reproduce Hofriyati society both physically and morally within the confines of the village, men mediate the power of the outside world to women, protecting them, acting as a buffer, and providing consumables (substances) for women to convert into sustenance and thence into human beings. Sexual complementarity, here and in other contexts, expresses the essential tension in Hofriyati culture: the desire to maintain social, cultural, and physical boundaries, and the practical need to overcome them, albeit selectively. Both are significant, for neither can be ignored if villagers are to heed the lessons of a turbulent history and harsh physical environment. This dialectic is also essential to the possession phenomenon, as we shall see.

Both men's and women's everyday experience is informed by the inward orientation of Hofriyat; yet the surgically altered bodies of women actively symbolize this cultural logic and their society's principal values.<sup>9</sup> In this exist some additional implications for women's identity: (1) Hofriyat women bear the onus of maintaining those values, a responsibility amplified by increasing male labor emigration (cf. Hale 1985); (2) women, who are identified with the inside, are not only protected but also dependent; and (3) intrusions of powerful forces from without are more likely to be registered in female bodies than in male ones.<sup>10</sup>

Taking these points in order, not only does a village woman's self-image rest squarely with her procreative ability, but also her sense of worth and social value. For only by giving birth, legitimately, to sons, might she achieve a position of respect and informal authority and, correspondingly, might her husband fulfill the ideal male role as founder of a lineage section. But more than this, the equation of femininity with socialized fertility and of the female marital role with reproduction means that responsibility for ensuring successful procreation—for giving men fitting, properly raised descendants and continuing society—belongs almost entirely to women. So, in the first stage of this process, if a woman fails to conceive within a year or two of her marriage, if she miscarries, bears a stillborn child, produces a daughter with her first pregnancy, or loses an unweaned infant, it is her ability to procreate that is called into question, not her husband's, and it is she who suffers as a result, through divorce or co-wifery. Such occurrences illuminate a fundamental contradiction for women in Hofriyat: they are collectively indispensable to society while individually dispensable to men. At the very least, fertility problems place intense strain on a woman's self-image and often fragile marital relations.

As noted earlier, the sexes are segregated. Women are expected to spend most of their time within family compounds bounded by high mud-brick walls; men, on the other hand, have considerable mobility. The sexes rarely eat together, and never do so in public or before guests. In traditional households—the majority—they also sleep in separate quarters. In most respects there is a significant rift between men's and women's worlds, which is widened by labor emigration, entailing prolonged separations of husbands from their wives (cf. Kennedy 1978:10 for Egyptian Nubians).

Within this polarized world, the sexes are conceived to be economically and productively interdependent: husbands and adult sons bear primary responsibility for production—they provide for their families through wage labor and/or farming—whereas wives and adult daughters consume and transform materials into items for consumption. Related to this, the essential dialectic between husband and wife, set in motion at their wedding,<sup>11</sup> is that between producer and social reproducer. The dual role of a married woman, that of consumer and reproducer, is aptly expressed in symbols and metaphors that identify her with pigeons and livestock: domestic animals kept within family houseyards, fed on grain and fodder supplied by male labor, and valued—apart from their use as food—for their capacity to beget offspring.<sup>12</sup>

In other matters, asymmetric gender complementarity extends to religion and, until recently,<sup>13</sup> education. Men participate fully in the public rites of Islam and most, having learned the Qu'ran, are functionally literate. They belong with rare exception to one of the two religious fraternities in the area and regularly attend their ceremonies, called *zikrs*. On the other hand, women over the age of 25 are largely illiterate. They perform their daily prayers in private, if at all, and only the elderly among them attend mosque. Women are sometimes permitted to watch a *zkr* but are always barred from active participation, and whether at mosque or a *zkr*, they are segregated from men.

As these points demonstrate, neither sexual complementarity nor the symbolic value of femininity implies gender equivalence. A woman's life is subject to notable constraints in Hofriyat: she is forever a jural minor, morally and financially governed by her male kin, subordinate also to her husband. Moreover, since personal integrity, dignity, and emotional control are highly valued in both sexes, and displays of emotion considered vulgar—especially so in mixed com-

pany—a woman may be hard pressed to dispute her husband or brothers should she feel wronged.

However constrained their interactions, and however weighted the system would seem in favor of males, it must be remembered that both sexes participate in and reproduce Hofriyati culture. Both are subject to its pressures, though in different ways; for both there are advantages and disadvantages. If men are better able to cope with problems in a marriage by taking a second wife or divorcing the first, they are still under considerable obligation to conform to kinship values, masculine ideals, and the tenets of Islam. If women are more restricted than men in other ways, they are less constrained with regard to religion: they are neither expected to become familiar with matters of liturgy and doctrine, nor to have sufficient moral strength on their own to uphold them. Phrased positively, this means that women are relatively freer to embrace what men consider folk beliefs, those having so-called pagan elements and in whose company they place the *zar*.

To men, possession is a feminine susceptibility. Women's moral frailty, their greater natural proportion of *nafs*, makes them less able to resist incursions of opportunistic spirits. While female Hofriyati are apt to take issue here, both sexes agree that *zairan* are greatly attracted to women<sup>14</sup>—and married women in particular—for it is they who use henna, cologne, scented oils, and soaps, and wear gold jewelry and diaphanous wraps, human finery which spirits are known to covet. The proclivities of *zairan*, though largely alien to villagers' (discussed below), are similar in some respects to those of village women: both are seen as inherently less governed by *'aqel* than men, and regarded as consumers of goods that men provide.

Although men publicly scorn the *zar*, privately they are not so intractable. For they, too, recognize the superior powers of *zairan*, and, feminine associations notwithstanding, a few told me they believe themselves to be possessed but would not openly admit to the affliction for fear of losing face. So, despite appearances of opposition, men tolerate women's involvement in the cult and are generally willing to provide for the spirits' demands. Few are inclined to doubt its efficacy.

### ***zairan* and *zar* possession**

In order to grasp what is involved in women's possession, we need to know something more about the spirits themselves. *Zairan* belong to a class of beings known as *jinn*, whose existence is substantiated in several verses of the Qu'ran. According to Hofriyati, *jinn* are the physical complementaries of humans in a holistic, quadripartite creation: where humans are composed of earth and water (Adam, the first human, is said to have been fashioned by Allah from moist clay), *jinn* are made up of fire and wind, or air. Humans are visible, substantial, and diurnal; *jinn* are normally invisible (though able to take human shape), formless, and nocturnal. Thus, *jinn* are natural beings—they are born, eventually they die—but their nature is such that they cannot wholly be confined by physical barriers like those (bodies, walls, and so forth) that contain human beings. They are therefore able to infiltrate humans and take possession of them at will. Once in possession, a *jinn* can influence the health and behavior of its human host; it does so either from within the body or by taking up a position above the head.

Most *jinn* are assimilated into three categories, coded by color. White *jinn* are benign; possession by one is not serious and in fact may go unnoticed. Black *jinn* or devils (*shawātīn*) bring grave disease and intractable mental illness; possession by one is a dire matter, and curable, if at all, only by violent exorcism. Sickness caused by a black *jinn* might well result in death. Last, there are red *jinn* or *zairan*, whose color points to a characteristic association with blood and human fertility. These are pleasure-seeking, capricious, ambivalent beings that bring milder forms of illness which, though initially distressful, never result in death or severe mental dysfunction. Should someone who is *zar* possessed fall critically ill, then natural causes or sentient



Figure 1. The woman in the foreground smokes a cigarette while going into trance at a zar ritual. The woman standing up manifests a male spirit with gestures and behavior appropriate to him.

agents other than *zairan* are implicated. *Zairan* must be placated and do not respond kindly to attempted exorcism.

*Zar* possession is a lifelong, fundamentally incurable condition that is, however, manageable. Indeed, after its initial stages, it may be transformed out of all resemblance to what we might consider illness. The possessed can hope to gain some control over her symptoms first, by accepting—both subjectively and publicly—the possession diagnosis, then by undergoing a curing ceremony during which she enters, via trance, into a contractual relationship with the spirit(s) responsible for her lapse in health. During the ceremony chants are drummed invoking the schedule of named *zairan*. When the spirit that plagues her is summoned, the patient ideally enters trance; now identified, the intruder manifests itself through her body and makes known its demands, in return for which it should agree to restore, and refrain from further jeopardizing, her well-being (see Figure 1).

Yet the successful conclusion of a woman's curing ceremony by no means ends her association—in or out of trance—with her *zar*. The spirit is said to remain above her, ready to enter her body at will. From a spirit's perspective, contracts with humans are infinitely renegotiable: if the possessed wishes to allay further attack from her *zar* she must mollify it continually. This requires her regular attendance at the *zar* ceremonies of others and performance of certain ritual acts on the spirit's behalf (for example, staining her hands or feet with henna in a particular [spirit] design). Should spirit or human neglect to uphold their agreement at any time, the latter may suffer relapse of her former illness. Yet the "cure" has opened communications between the two and any future difficulties can be dealt with expeditiously. If all goes well, what begins as an uneasy truce between a willful spirit and its reluctant host might graduate to positive symbiosis as their relationship stabilizes and matures.

One thing that the hedonistic *zar* hopes to gain by possessing a human being is a venue for access to the human world in ceremonial contexts where it can frolic and be entertained. Thus, when a spirit is ritually summoned by its chant, it simultaneously infiltrates each of its entranced

hosts so as to interact with the human assembly through their bodies. Such rituals are always fraught with tension and surprise, for at any moment a woman might be “seized” by a spirit that Hofriyat did not before know existed, or she did not know she had. One by one, throughout an evening’s drumming, the spirits “descend” (*nazal*) into their hosts in the order that their chants are played. A spirit enters its host when called upon and, if well behaved, relinquishes her body when its chant is over and the rhythm shifts to that of another *zar*. Since an adept may be possessed by several different spirits at once, a woman might be in and out of trance all night as her various spirits descend and manifest themselves for up to 20 minutes each. When not entranced she participates in the drumming and chanting while observing other women who are.

Thus, in Hofriyat a woman is not considered to be possessed because she becomes entranced; rather, she becomes entranced because she is possessed.<sup>15</sup> According to villagers, since possession trance fulfills their part of a bargain with the spirit world to restore and maintain human health, it is not pathological but therapeutic. Yet just how it might be therapeutic remains unresolved, and is an issue I will shortly address. On leaving trance women say they “see things differently” and they “feel well,” statements that might be construed as affirming that the state itself has intrinsic remedial powers. But, even should this be the case, to limit the therapeutic value of *zar* to that of trance would be artificial and inadequate. The *zar* rite is a cultural therapy; its curative powers derive less from a virtual experience of trance than from the entire possession context that renders it, and countless other experiences, meaningful. Indeed, an individual’s experience of trance is largely constructed by its context: in Hofriyat, possession provides her with a model of what trance is and should be like.

Still, if trance is an integral part of possession therapy and relapse prophylaxis, it is only one manifestation of possession, not consistently evinced by the possessed during ceremonies and, when evinced, variable in apparent depth and duration from one individual to the next. Not all who enter trance do so for immediate therapeutic motives; many who manifest their spirits do not feel sick at the time, though they are classed as ill. A *zar* rite is more than just a cure; it is also referred to as a “party” (*ḥafla*) (cf. Saunders 1977 on *zar* in Egypt). Despite its solemn aim to alleviate suffering, it can be a great deal of fun, mixing comedy, satire, and intellectual challenge in a heady atmosphere where nothing is quite as it seems. Possession trance is, I contend, therapeutic, but its therapeutic potential is broad, not confined to achieving a medical or psychological cure, and lies as much with observing it in others as experiencing it oneself. Even the experience of it is subordinate to an earlier acceptance of a possession diagnosis. In short, the relevant issue in the case of the *zar* is not trance per se, but trance firmly situated in a meaningful cultural context—possession—having medical, social, psychological, and often profound aesthetic implications. Before considering these, the nature of the illness that signals possession remains to be addressed.

## **possession as illness**

Here I will begin to pull together the threads of my argument, indicating how possession is linked to what I consider is Hofriyat women’s problematic selfhood. But on this issue, especially, I walk the ethnographer’s unsteady line between keeping faith with informants’ experience of their world and rendering that experience intelligible in the more familiar parlance of Western culture. In the attempt I must surely transgress realities on either side. For the *zar* in Hofriyat is a holistic phenomenon; it penetrates every facet of human existence. Consequently, it defies analytic reduction to a single constituent dimension: psychological, medical, or social, with which members of Western cultures might feel more at home (cf. Crapanzano 1977:11). I have no doubt that in partially subjecting the possession idiom to an alien culture’s constructs, some of its texture, richness, and cultural integrity will be lost. But similarly, in adapting con-

cepts that have accepted meanings in our culture to aspects of another in which they do not exactly apply, the concepts—such as “illness,” “person,” or “self”—may be altered. The result is a partial distortion from either perspective. Yet, as the *zar* itself proposes, distortions can sometimes be instructive.

By now it is commonplace to say that a sociocultural system provides the stresses that trigger the illnesses to which its members succumb, directs those members’ coping responses, and furnishes an interpretive framework which renders their experiences meaningful, enables them to be expressed, and suggests possible therapeutic resolutions. Earlier I described some stresses and constraints to which Hofriyati women are exposed, and noted the strong identification they are implicitly and materially subjected, in the Foucaultian sense, (Foucault 1980:97) to feel with their fertility. When a woman’s fertility mandate is impaired—for whatever reason—her self-image, social position, and ultimately general health are threatened. Women undergoing severe marital and/or fertility crises tend to phrase their experiences as illness or, less directly, to co-locate their difficulties with the onset of apparently unrelated physical symptoms. In thus complaining of illness, a woman avails herself of a culturally sanctioned medium for articulating her dysphoria (Constantinides 1977:65; cf. Kleinman 1980 *passim*; with specific reference to complaints of possession illness, cf. Crapanzano 1977, Firth 1967, Lambek 1981, Obeyesekere 1970). Once this is done she can act upon her problems, where before she could not, by setting out to find a cure. The woman who claims to be ill but does not appear diseased does not feign sickness; her pain is real and may be attributed to what, from her perspective, are natural agents: *zairan*.

Hofriyati themselves link fertility problems and illness, although more subtly and obliquely than I have just proposed. A woman who is anxious or depressed is considered a prime target for *zairan* seeking entry to the human world; should such a spirit descend upon her it makes her feel “unwell.” But, tautologically, *zairan* are able to create the very circumstances that make a woman anxious and prone to spirit assault. Their most common tactic is to “seize,” “hold,” or “steal” offspring, bringing about miscarriage, stillbirth, amenorrhea, or other problems affecting women’s blood. Thus spirits can hold a woman’s future and that of her husband for ransom, forcing both to acknowledge their presence and accede to their demands. *Zairan* have considerable leverage over human reproduction, and for this reason also are drawn to married women and unlikely to beset the unwed. However, not all possession incidents can be traced to uncertain fertility,<sup>16</sup> and it must be remembered that such problems are first expressed as “illness” (*aya*); for here possession is the ultimate of several potential etiologies.

Whatever the precipitating context, initial indications of possession are usually physical, ranging from vague somatic complaints—nausea, listlessness, fatigue, unspecified aches and pains—to those resembling symptoms of hysterical conversion disorders in the West—paralysis of one or more limbs without apparent organic cause, aphonia. Certain more obvious affective conditions are also associated with possession, though Hofriyati might just as easily link them to sorcery or the evil eye, both of which increase susceptibility to spirit attack. These symptoms are all located in parts of the body (generally the abdomen or heart), and include apathy and boredom (*zihuj*), insomnia, anorexia, and “inflamed soul” (*ḥarrāg rūḥ*)—glossed as excessive worry.

Deciding whether a particular incidence of ill health should be ascribed to possession, to some other cause—or, indeed, to both—can be problematic for the sufferer. Because possession is a chronic and irrevocable condition, it is always considered when a woman who knows she is possessed falls sick, whatever her symptoms may be. But even the possessed can be stricken by natural disease or the mystical act of some human antagonist, intended (sorcery) or not (evil eye). Like one who has yet to establish that she is possessed, an adept cannot presume that *zairan* are at fault if she wishes to avoid being thought disingenuous.<sup>17</sup>

Villagers generally approach any illness that is not immediately debilitating by testing various etiologic possibilities, moving from an initial presumption of organic (our “natural”) causes

and, having eliminated these, through consideration of various nonorganic ones. Someone who is sick first takes advice from family members, trying a selection of home remedies and available patent medicines. Should these prove ineffective, the individual next seeks relief from Western medical practitioners. If doctors can find nothing wrong, or if something is wrong but is perceived by the patient as poorly responsive to treatment (whether medication, diet, hospitalization, and/or surgery), then nonorganic factors are implicated. These may be inhibiting biomedical therapy or prolonging a natural illness beyond its normal course. Without forsaking Western medical treatment, the patient (or a family member) now visits a religious doctor, a *feki Islam*, who performs an astrological divination and consults religious manuals in an effort to diagnose the complaint. The *feki* specifies whether the illness is due to sorcery, the evil eye, or possession by jinn, then prepares health restoring charms and advises the client on how to conduct her life. If a jinn is found to be the trouble, the *feki* may perform an exorcism, to which *zairan* alone among the jinn are wholly immune. Hence, a relative failure of both Western and Islamic medicine reads as a positive indication that one is possessed by a *zar*.

For men, who disparage bargaining with spirits, this is where the diagnostic process stops; except in rare cases they do not seek treatment for apparent possession. But for women whose symptoms persist the next step is to consult a *sheikha*—a female *zar* practitioner—in order to verify the diagnosis and begin to accommodate the spirit responsible. The *sheikha* communes with her own possessive *zairan*, which provide oneiric evidence of the client's condition. Although possession is by now a foregone conclusion, it is only when a woman has such support for her diagnosis that she will accept it publicly and begin to organize a "cure." The subjective recognition that she is possessed thus emerges as a product of social discourse through which the full context of her affliction is established to be other than that of normally treatable illness. Worth noting is that her public acknowledgment together with her family's promise to mount a spirit ceremony on her behalf are often followed by a notable remission of the patient's symptoms. Indeed, her curing ceremony may be staged, if at all, months or even years after the initial illness has abated. Public acceptance of one's possession is itself therapeutic and takes the urgency out of having to undergo a spirit cure. It has what Tambiah (1977) refers to as a "performative effect"—it shifts her illness to another plane of discourse and, so doing, transforms it. I discuss the import of this transformation later on.

Considering the character of its initial symptoms, their resistance to Western medicine and their apparent self-punitive features, it is tempting to think of possession as an idiom for symptoms that our culture would label as neurotic. But this would be inaccurate; the categories "neurotic" and "possessed" are not coterminous. Not all who become possessed appear to be neurotic, and many who evince so-called neurotic symptoms are never diagnosed as possessed. Further, if possession is an idiom for certain kinds of illness, the reverse is also true: illness is an idiom for possession (cf. Jilek 1974:32; Kapferer 1983:87–89; Lambek 1981:53), a way of articulating the feeling that one might be possessed. Therefore, those who exhibit nondysphoric signs of possession, like having visions of spirits and spirit-related things, are automatically considered ill (*'ayāna*, *marḍāna*) even if they seem perfectly healthy. This is hardly because such visions are abnormal in Hofriyat. Here the existence of spirits is an undisputed fact and seeing one is rare, but not too unusual. (I was occasionally mistaken for a Western *zar* on first meetings with villagers.) Rather, the possessed are ill because they are possessed.

In another vein, a woman will usually consider herself ill should she have witnessed or experienced something untoward or paradoxical, out of keeping with Hofriyat notions of the way things ought to be: for example, smelling the odor of sweat at a wedding, throwing dust on her elaborately braided hair upon hearing news of a death, or taking fright when walking abroad alone at night. These situations, however common, are all in some way cultural contradictions: weddings extol the purity of women; women's braids signify their married fertility, the opposite of death; humans are diurnal and women ought to remain indoors. Here illness, to paraphrase Douglas (1966), is experience out of place, and events that give rise to it may be read as indi-

cations that the external spirit world is impinging on the human and subverting its proper order.<sup>18</sup> They threaten most the ideals and constraints of Hofriyati womanhood, and either signify or precipitate possession by *zairan*.

Inversely, the demands of possessive spirits that their hosts eat “clean” foods; abstain from traditional mourning behavior such as sleeping on the ground; bathe with imported (Lux) soap; use henna and cologne; wear gold and clean clothing; and avoid overwork, anger, and frustration with kin, all have to do with the maintenance of feminine ideals. Combined with the link between possession and fertility,<sup>19</sup> the above points suggest that for Hofriyati women, possession is intimately bound up with feminine self-image and standards of conduct.<sup>20</sup> It is a condition perpetrated by capricious external agents, which demand preservation of a woman’s ideal self, but may create or seize upon a situation in which these ideals are jeopardized in order to take control of her body, thus transforming it into a vessel of otherness. This they do so as ultimately to enjoy the earthly pleasure that upholding such ideals provides. But, more convoluted still, the spirits that so admire Hofriyati womanhood are themselves exemplars of its antithesis. This is really the crux of the possession phenomenon, and requires further explanation.

### discussion: spirits and female selves

Earlier I pointed out that within the Hofriyati universe, *zairan* are natural beings whose abilities exceed those of humans but are nonetheless subject to limitation. In composition, morality, and proclivity, *zairan* are the counterparts of humans in a holistic creation. But this exhausts neither their obversity nor their correspondence.

*Zairan* inhabit a world parallel to our own and contiguous with it, yet imperceptible to humans except under certain conditions. Like us, they are divided into ethnic groups, families, occupations, and religions. They are either male or female (principally the former), and children, adults, or elders. They are neither wholly good nor wholly bad but, like humans, something of both. Their salient characteristics are ambivalence, amorality, and caprice, in all of which they differ from humans only by excess. Among their numbers are the spirit analogues of Muslim saints, Turkish administrators, “Europeans” (including North Americans, Hindus, and Chinese), Ethiopians, Syrian gypsies, West Africans, nomadic Arabs, and Southern Sudanese, in short, of all human groups with whom Hofriyati have had contact over the past 150 years or more. Each spirit within these categories is named and has an individual history, typical behaviors when appearing in the human world, and relationships with other *zairan* that cross-cut ethnic and religious lines.

Significantly, the spirits that possess Hofriyati belong only to foreign societies: villagers have no *zairan* that match themselves. Indeed, *zairan* epitomize all that is *not* Hofriyati in an integral, sentient universe; they are quintessential “others,” at once physically, socially, and culturally alien to human villagers. This is especially true for Hofriyati women, since *zairan* represent extreme exteriority: they are powerful outsiders par excellence. Even Muslim *zairan*, exhibiting the positive traits of piety and self-control, ultimately subvert local values by being wed exogamously, to non-kin adherents of other faiths. Unlike circumcised, socialized women, who represent a victory of *’aqel* over their naturally dominant *nafs*—of social concerns over self-interest—*zairan* are beings in whom *nafs* is permitted free rein.

Considering the qualities of *zairan* and villagers’ cultural logic, it is unsurprising that women should be thought more vulnerable than men to spirit assault. Clearly this has broader implications than for diagnosing individual illness. This is so because for Hofriyati, who have a keen sense of who they are and how they differ from outsiders (cf. also Kennedy 1978), it is not only fertility but cultural identity that is vested in women’s selves. In local thought the body is a virtual microcosm of village society (cf. Douglas 1966, 1973). Like village boundaries, body

orifices are ambiguous, however necessary and inevitable. They are prone to a litany of dangers—spirit intrusion not least—and regulated by complex ritual procedures. They are considered best, both defensively and aesthetically, if kept as small as possible. The most ambiguous and problematic body opening is the vaginal meatus, for it is through women's bodies and uterine blood that village society can be renewed appropriately, from within itself, or inappropriately opened up to potentially destructive influences from without. So a woman's fertility must be defended, reserved and safeguarded first by pharaonic circumcision, then by endogamous marriage.

This brings us back to the issue of feminine self-image. I have discussed how through circumcision a woman's body is transformed into a living vessel of her culture's moral values, and she is thereafter exhorted to conduct herself accordingly. Female circumcision, plus the entire complex of associations and practices that express and realize femininity, strongly support the identification of the individual with her role—both social and symbolic—in Hofriyati culture.<sup>21</sup> This is the point: so tangibly socialized are women to this view of themselves that, for many, to experience the world otherwise is to experience it, quite literally, as a non-Hofriyati.

Thus reformulated, a central problem that possession addresses, in hundreds of idiosyncratic ways, is the cultural overdetermination of women's selfhood. To review the various concepts of "self" and "person" found in the literature is beyond the scope of this paper (see Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985); however, let me clarify my analytical usage of these terms before giving closer consideration to the Hofriyati case. Drawing upon Burrige's argument in *Someone, No One: An Essay on Individuality* (1979), and, in a parallel vein, from Kegan's constructive-developmental psychology (1982), the self as a theoretical construct can be provisionally conceptualized, not as an entity, but as a creative energy or process, which actively engages the world, integrating the human biological organism with its physical and sociocultural environments, continually moving, becoming, maturing, making and organizing meaning (Burrige 1979:5ff., 21; Kegan 1982:2–15; cf. Elster 1986). Burrige writes,

the fact of integration—some sort of coherence or coordination of the parts or constituents of being—does not detach the integrative energy or self from its constituents, but still makes it more than the sum of the parts and, in that sense, conceptually and empirically distinct [1979:5].

In these terms, a self that is integrating in conformity with others realizes the "person": "[one] who, in reproducing in word and deed the norms of a given traditional order, manifests the relations of that tradition" (1979:5). In Hofriyat, the extreme identification of women with the cultural image of womanhood precipitates such a compression of the subjective self into an objective female person: a normative set of given roles and statuses, an entity in whom experience is continuously subordinated to cultural categories (Burrige 1979:28, *passim*), a publicly confirmed social representation (La Fontaine 1985:124). The projections of significant others—just as determined, perhaps, by feminine images and ideals—dominate her internal dialogue. She is compelled to personhood.

What the Hofriyati woman does not become or, better, is not at this stage given scope to become, is, in Burrige's terms, an "individual": a "moral critic who envisages another kind of social or moral order" (1979:5).

Becoming aware of a gap between the person's reproductions and the truth of things by seizing on or being seized by peculiarly significant events, the self is moved to a transcendence of the traditional categories, to a reintegration of the event in a new rationalization assigning new meaning and relevance. In this transcendence and reintegration, manifest in the new rationalization, the self realizes the individual [1979:7].

Burrige suggests that most people oscillate between these two integrative moments (p. 5); yet, given the close identification women are encouraged to feel with their fertility, the quotidian Hofriyati context actively conspires against such movement and the realization of "individuality" in their case. It effectively denies them the possibility to grow in self-awareness, to mature, to reflect on the categories of early socialization in which selfhood is enmeshed. Women's selfhood is, I submit, culturally overdetermined.

Why overdetermined? Because, paradoxically, the moral self-image women are enjoined to assume cannot always be sustained by experience. In this lies an ambiguity inherent to morality—between what is and what ought to be—which their continuous socialization may eventually fail to overcome: the woman who is, by definition, “morally appropriate fertility,” may experience infertility or some other significant contravention of her feminine self-image.

The tension that the awareness of such untoward experience creates in her is first construed as a problem of internal disorder and registered as illness: in Hofriyat, body and person are not distinguished; hence, threats to one’s sense of self and to the world in which one’s self is located automatically jeopardize physical well-being. When this is coupled with the restriction on expressing emotion, the somatization of her dysphoria seems a normal, culturally appropriate response (cf. Kleinman 1980). It has the added effect of directing attention toward the one imperiled and away from a precipitating context likely to involve close superordinate kin, whom women, especially, feel powerless to rebuke or entreat. This leads to an important point: the feminine self in Hofriyat is constituted not only, as I have suggested, ideally, but also (among other ways) relationally. It is a virtual impossibility for a villager to think of himself or herself except in relation to kin.<sup>22</sup> Thus illness, as an idiom for the expression of threatened selfhood, actually defends certain constituents of the self, notably, its formative relationships.

A great many villagers somatize negative affect, but not all go on to consider their illness a symptom of possession. Such admission signals a profound transformation of context, from one narrowly described by idioms of interiority that govern the commonsense world, to a broader one that places this orientation in relation to its converse: dysphoria for the possessed originates not within the self and its constituents, but outside them, indeed, outside the human world of Hofriyat. This, on the one hand, rationalizes the untoward event in a way which vehemently defends the socialized self, for the self’s experience is again subordinated to “natural” categories—*zairan*—however extraordinary they might seem. From an observer’s perspective, *zairan* symbolize and render concrete a woman’s experiences of the world that conflict with her consensually validated view of what that experience should be like.

Thus, with acceptance of a possession diagnosis comes disassociation of the experience from her self. Yet this not only supports her self-image, but also plants the seeds of its modification. First, by shifting the context of her illness from one of internal contradiction to external confrontation,<sup>23</sup> of self or self-and-village-other to self-plus-alien-spirit, the potential for a negotiated resolution becomes apparent. More than this, *zairan* are representatives of non-Hofriyati cultures and by virtue of their extraordinariness, of their abilities and powers, of their failure to conform with local norms and rules even as they intervene in the course of village life, possession as a human condition allows for the possibility of ambiguity and otherness, otherwise lacking in the gender socialization process for women in Hofriyat. The context of the possessed’s situation is now widened to incorporate the actions of beings from an alien yet parallel world. Both the entropy of well-being and location of its source in possession open up pathways for self-renewal, permitting a limited and, in this context, functional dissonance between person and self. In such cases illness itself may be therapeutic.

What I am describing is, I think, rather different from what appears to happen in emotional disorders common to Western cultures. If the self is truly a social construct and individual selves are constructed (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1967) or integrated (Burrige 1979) in the course of social interaction, the constituents and parameters of selfhood can be expected to vary from society to society. So, while parallels can be found between hysterical neurosis and Hofriyati possession, in that both conditions involve dissociation and may present initially as somatic complaints, these may be more obvious than real (cf. Ward 1982:416). The two “illnesses” are grounded in disparate cultural contexts, based on rather different conceptualizations of the self. At the risk of simplification, perhaps one could characterize certain neuroses in Western cultures, where “self” is conceived as a bounded, individuated entity (cf. Geertz 1983:59), as an overdetermination of selfhood whose symptoms are excessive subjectivity—a weakening of the

ability to take the role of the “other” relative to one’s self. In Hofriyat, where the essential feminine self is highly idealized, the problem seems to be one of excessive objectification: self is firmly identified with village “other” and identity emotionally realized in cultural symbolism to the point where any event perceived to negate that tenuous equation negates the woman’s self. Thus, the most striking similarities occur between the normative process of curing or accommodating possession illness (that is, disengaging the self from its context) and the aberrant one of developing a neurosis—resulting in many an unfortunate lay observation that adepts are chronic hysterics. Despite thorough disassociation<sup>24</sup> of the untoward event from the Hofriyati woman’s self, she does not, like the textbook hysteric, unconsciously deny her experiences of otherness so much as embrace them, while consciously recognizing them as aspects of her being over which she has limited if potentially increasing control.

If we see spirits as symbolic of symptoms (cf. Obeyesekere 1981:34–35), and symptoms as idiomatic of spirit intrusion (cf. Kapferer 1983:87; Lambek 1981:53), we do not stray far from Hofriyati logic. But if we view spirits and symptoms as dissociated facets of the possessed woman’s self, as our own psychology might direct us to do (cf. LaBarre 1975:41; Bourguignon 1979:286), we violate villagers’ reality. We tacitly dismiss *zairan* as facts of Hofriyati existence and mistakenly employ a highly individualistic and compartmentalized concept of the self which has no basis in village culture. This, in turn, leads to an individualistic orientation to illness which, because it rarely addresses social context, misses the point of most illness in Hofriyat, including possession. Moreover, even the assumption that spirits represent projections of intolerable feelings is, as Crapanzano (1977:12) notes, a debatable one: spirits, like the illnesses they cause, originate outside the human self, not within it. Unlike Western psychotherapy, which encourages the patient to accept and integrate previously dissociated feelings as part of herself, *zar* therapy works by convincing her to recognize them as separated from herself in the first place. Clearly, any attempt to merge such feelings and experiences with the Hofriyati woman’s self—which I have described as idealized and relational, but is, after all, her self—would be ethnopsychiatrically inappropriate. It could only deny her the validity of that self and potentially do more harm than good.

Again from an observer’s perspective, one way to make sense of all this is by reference to the concept of framing. Following Elster (1986:27), the Hofriyati woman’s illness is “reframed” by a diagnosis of possession in such a way that the precipitating behavior or event—for example, infertility—becomes compatible with her self-image: she *is* fertile, for spirits have seen fit to usurp this most valuable asset. She generalizes that future untoward experiences do not undermine the equation of womanhood with fertility and all the rest; they signify the actions of *zairan*, who, unlike humans, are capricious and unpredictable. But for this there is a remedy. Thus, although dissociation may be psychologically adaptive for both Western neurotics and Hofriyati possessed, only for the former may it be symptomatic of pathology. For Hofriyati it is therapeutic. Most of those who acknowledge possession are competent, mentally healthy women who have responded in a culturally appropriate way to a stressful situation (cf. Crapanzano 1977:14).

When a village woman who feels unwell but has identified no organic or mystical source for her complaint accepts that she is possessed, she can begin to recover. Her possessive spirit or spirits, soon to be revealed, gradually take shape as a part of her being which is not, so to speak, a part of her person, her Hofriyati self.<sup>25</sup> It is during possession trance that the identity and characteristics of this non-kin, non-Hofriyati, non-human, but above all non-self existent are publicly established, both for the woman and those who observe her. Once established, this veritable non-self is linked, inextricably, to her self; it is not, however, integrated with her person, a situation that possession rituals stress and seek to maintain. Still, though rarely manifest in her body, the spirit constituents of her non-self are in constant attendance, influencing her decisions and perceptions to the point where some of my informants spoke of themselves as if they were pluralities, substituting “we” (*nehna*) for “I” (*ānā*). Furthermore, since a spirit might

possess any number of Hofriyati simultaneously, a woman's non-self, like her self, is unlikely to be individualistic: possession by a common spirit binds her to other Hofriyati selves and zar non-selves, yet in ways other than those specified by kinship, providing new ways to think about human relationships.

The felt presence of a "non-self" enhances, by opposition, a woman's sense of personhood, continuously affirming the integrity of what once might have been problematic. Though exogenous to her self, the non-self is, and becomes increasingly, essential to the self's comprehension (cf. Young 1975:578). Conversely, however, a woman's sense of self provides a negative ground by which to apprehend the parameters of her spirits. These two aspects of her being are maintained in contraposition throughout her life, neither reducing to its opposite, each becoming enriched in sympathy with the other, shifting, expanding, or contracting as their mutual situation changes over time.

In this way possession enables a woman to evolve, to recontextualize her experiences from a broadened perspective (cf. Kegan 1982). *Zairan* posit alternative sets of moral discriminations that are realized and displayed through her body and others' during trance. As detailed below, the observation and enactment of such episodes provides the possibility, by no means the assurance, that the integrating self will be "seized with a contrary or critical perception" (Burridge 1979:28) and empowered to alter her conditioning, to transcend the categories that have constrained her, to recognize them for what they are—cultural constructs, not immutable truths. The paradox of Hofriyati possession is that it defends the person while also enabling the self: it is at once a self-enhancing and self-maintaining condition.<sup>26</sup>

## trance

It is through possession trance that the existence of her non-self becomes subjectively real to the possessed, or "introjected" (cf. Crapanzano 1977:13), and the culturally overdetermined self may be felicitously repositioned, perhaps transcended. The experience of trance and its observation in others is the locus of possession's creativity, for in trance a woman becomes, legitimately if temporarily, a non-Hofriyati. In doing so she is indirectly cautioned that she and the symbolic constructs that define her sex are separate and distinct, however much the latter inform her image of self. Trance provides her the possibility of insight, of maturing, yet it does so obliquely, in a way that does not demand she take responsibility for her conclusions.

To begin with the notion of introjection, or the patient's subjective realization of a spirit's attachment and influence, the self of the possessed is not merely absent or repressed during trance in deference to that of the spirit, but, according to Hofriyati, actively engaged. Though she may be unaware of what her *zar* is doing while manifest to others, she is, villagers say, still aware, for when she and her spirit coalesce in her body they exchange experiential domains. With this the possessed transcends the visible world and "sees through the eyes of the spirit" into the normally invisible parallel universe. Thus she has, not a mystical experience, but an eminently social one. If possessed by a European spirit she experiences as a "European" would for the duration of its chant. My informants tell me they see and interact with other Europeans in European ways and perceive themselves to be surrounded by the trappings of European culture.<sup>27</sup> For that brief period, they say, a woman forgets who she is, her village, and family; she "knows nothing from her life." In having such a vision or, to use villagers' description, in briefly stepping outside the Hofriyati world and into another, a woman also briefly divests her self of its personhood, of its normative contents and constraints. In proportion to her subjective experience of otherness, her everyday reality is made to appear as one of many—less naturalized, less unquestionable, indeed, less subjectively real.<sup>28</sup> The experience of trance is also, of course, a cultural one. Spirits are recognized entities; their social milieus are known, if incompletely understood. Yet despite this cultural patterning, or, in fact, because of it, trance is a liminal

excursion. By the possessed's own admission the experience is one of temporary isolation, of alienation from her Hofriyati world.

There is, I think, a subtle difference between this situation and what Kapferer (1983, 1986) suggests takes place during the complex Sinhalese exorcism ceremony, which it is instructive to explore. There the demonic victim comes to the ritual already in "an existential state of solitude in the world" (1986:185) and it is the purpose of the ceremony to reintegrate her with society. This is accomplished in the structure of the performance where "the culturally understood subjective world of the patient finds external form" (1986:199); the demonic, in all its chaos and terror, becomes temporarily manifest and dominant in the human world. Having drawn the victim's family and friends—non-possessed participants—to experience what is construed to be the subjective state of the possessed, and thus linked their perceptions, the ritual then proceeds, via a subsequent comedic episode, to reassert cultural order and bring both patient and audience back into the world of shared understandings (1986:201).

In Hofriyat it is not so much that shared understandings are precipitately undermined by a woman's untoward experience, but that the rigidity of these understandings and her emotional identification with them *prevents* them from being undermined, prevents her from being able to appreciate the distinction between ideals and the exigencies of concrete situations. If anything, she is too firmly grounded in the social world. In the villagers' view, spirits are attempting to subvert the order of that world but she resists their influence—as she is exhorted by Islam to do. Yet as curers and adepts rightly observe, it is only when she lets them in, when she loosens her hold on her reality and enters an "existential state of solitude," that she can start to recover.

Recovery entails the experience and observation of trance in others. Like other such ritual moments, the occasion is rife with ambiguities and potential ambivalences.<sup>29</sup> The qualities of spirits when juxtaposed to those of humans give play to the imagination. It is during such episodes that, as Burridge argues, the would-be individual "perceives a hidden message and accepts the invitation to explore" (1979:145). Possession trance encourages reflection, a limited dismantling of the taken-for-granted world, enabling the possessed, in its aftermath, to see her life in a very different light. To take a mundane example: an orange or a piece of bread, when eaten with knife and fork by a Westerner *zar* during trance (which normally Hofriyati would not do), becomes something other than villagers' food, or a metaphor for Hofriyati gender dialectics: interior/exterior, fluid/substance, and so on. Its "natural" associations are stripped away, deconstructed.

A more protracted example further illustrates my point: it relates to the Hofriyati wedding. The climax of that ceremony comes near dawn of the third day when the virgin bride is led out of seclusion. A bridal shawl of red and gold silk, used also to cover girls at their circumcisions and women during childbirth, is draped over her head, concealing all of her body but her legs. She is positioned on a red mat in the center of the courtyard, where she stands, barefoot and immobile, until her husband steps onto the mat and removes the shawl. Now unveiled, she is seen in all her finery and her family's gold, elaborately hennaed hands covering her face in a gesture of timidity. Gently the groom releases her arms and she begins the exacting bridal dance—eyes tightly shut, arms extended to the sides, back arched, feet moving in mincing rhythmic steps that barely leave the mat. Toward the end of each song she breaks off her dance and shyly recovers her face, then recommences with the groom's signal, as before, repeating the sequence until she has had enough and her kinswomen lead her away. At no time ought the bride to have seen her husband or the gathering for whom her dance was the focus of rapt attention and long anticipation. The wedding dance is a poetic, crystalline demonstration of femininity in Hofriyat.

By contrast, in the *zar* realm, Luliya is a female Ethiopian prostitute spirit which demands that its human host obtain Sudanese wedding incense, jewelry, and a bridal shawl for its use during possession ceremonies. When Luliya appears during a ritual, a bridal mat is spread and the spirit, in the body of its host, dances as a Hofriyati bride. When the silken veil is removed

Luliya's host's hands cover her face; when these are pulled away she starts to dance with eyes closed, though in a less inhibited manner than the bride and with obvious pretense at shyness.

What is happening here? On one level, a wanton, uncircumcised, nominally Christian alien presumes to dance as a chaste, circumcised, Muslim village woman. In the attempt the spirit tries to suppress its libertine disposition but overcompensates, exaggerating the controlled steps of a bride to the point where simulated Hofriyati drama becomes a spirit farce. Luliya is not by nature bashful; its timidity must be feigned. The spirit's real personality shows through the facade it erects with the aid of its host, illuminating the enacted Hofriyati behaviors against a background of patently non-Hofriyati traits.

But this is not all. What the audience actually observes is a normally restrained, circumcised Hofriyati woman in the role of a wanton, uncircumcised alien who in turn "plays" a village woman who is the epitome of restraint and self-control. In looking at the "other," Hofriyati see the other looking at them, while in looking at the woman entranced, they see themselves looking at the other looking at them. The multiple reflection is dramatically sustained . . . then suddenly shatters as Luliya peeks furtively over the hands of its host, giving itself away to the uproarious laughter of its human audience.

These and other densely convoluted episodes constitute more than a comic discourse on the ambiguities of gender and sexuality, for, as such, they raise them as issues in themselves and point to the somewhat subversive observation (in Hofriyat) that gender is not a natural attribute but a cultural construct and thus, perhaps, modifiable. Hence, categories that are largely unquestioned in the course of daily life become problematic in the *zar*. Through the accumulation of such episodes trance affords the participant an opportunity to mature: to grow, as Turner says, through antistructure (1982:114), to grasp not only her context, but the context of her context (cf. Bateson 1972). Possession is as much an aesthetic, a means to perceive new and rewarding or possibly disturbing significances in what was formerly taken for granted, as it is therapy, a means to correct faulty perceptions, to cure.

Yet many who consider possession trance and ritual legitimate psychotherapy nonetheless disclaim their capacity to promote insightful reflection among the possessed (Bourguignon 1979:290–291; Kennedy 1967:191; Prince 1964:115). Such "folk" therapies are generally considered to be effective in repatterning idiosyncratic conflicts and defenses in culturally appropriate ways, and furnishing a corrective emotional experience, the sanctioned release of negative affect (Bourguignon 1979:274; Devereaux 1980:17–18; Kennedy 1967:189; Kleinman 1980:169–170). Here the patient's condition may be remedied, not cured, though her acknowledged vulnerability to relapse may be mitigated if she is incorporated into a cult providing group support for a healthful reorientation (Bourguignon 1979:291; Kennedy 1967:191–192; Lewis 1971 *passim*; Messing 1958:1125). Yet, despite the success of "folk" psychotherapies in securing symptom remission, and regardless of how culturally appropriate such techniques may be, they are often dismissed as inadequate when compared to Western psychoanalysis (Kiev 1964; for example, Derret 1979:291 and Ozturk 1964:361). They are judged deficient because apparently unable to provide the patient an opportunity for mature reflection, which constitutes the basis for a psychiatric cure (Devereaux 1980:17–18).

None of these views does justice to the richness of the possession experience. In Hofriyat the context of possession carries within it the potential for insightful self-examination, however differently conceived from that of Western psychoanalysis. For what constitutes insight into the self is surely described by the cultural construction of an individual's selfhood. In cases of neurosis in Western cultures, psychotherapy provides a context in which the patient can learn to objectivate himself through conversation, to gain distance from an exaggerated "I." In Hofriyat, as we have seen, possession trance provides a context in which the patient is encouraged to achieve distance from her cultural context, the source of her over-objectification. Both therapies aim at replenishing the culturally specific constitution of the self by exploring and tran-

scending former pitfalls: as individuals acquire insight into the process of self-construction, healthy, more appropriate dispositions of selfhood are suggested.

In the *zar*, dialogue takes place between a woman and her spirit(s)—her non-self—internally, through visions and dreams, and externally, through the reports of fellow villagers about her spirit's actions during trance (cf. Lambek 1980). Through such oblique discourse the possessed might work through her problems to achieve a greater understanding of herself and her society (Crapanzano 1977:26). She is now given occasion to achieve a degree of detachment from the gender constructs that have so completely shaped her being, thus to establish a basis for the negotiation of her subordination.<sup>30</sup> Possession, like anthropology, is a reflexive discourse: through it Hofriyati women can step outside their everyday world and gain perspective on their lives.

Trance is a significant factor in this process, whether experienced or observed. It has been defined as a temporary, subjectively felt change in an individual's reality orientation accompanied by a fading to abeyance of reflective, critical awareness (Deikman 1969:45; Ludwig 1968; Shor 1969:246; Van der Walde 1968). If we accept this view, the woman who sees into the spirit world during trance is in a state of heightened receptivity; she becomes, like the Ndembu initiand, a virtual *tabula rasa* (Turner 1969:103). If her trance is deep enough and involving enough, she is thus presented with pure experience, vivid, unedited, emotionally real, and not just once, but several times, as throughout the ritual she takes on a sequence of other selves. It may not be during trance that she deepens her understanding of herself but afterwards, in remembering her trance experiences (cf. Kapferer 1986:198) as she is expected to do. Such insights as are gleaned come indirectly, through witnessing several dimensions of what her self is not. Yet none of this is certain. The therapeutic efficacy of possession trance resists objective measurement, as does any aesthetic experience. For some who say they see things differently, this may signal a real change in outlook, somatic disposition, and emotional balance. For others, it may not.

When discussing the therapeutics of possession trance, its potential effect on an unentranced audience is rarely considered. But possession trance is only part experience; it is also part performance (Leiris 1958). When the spirits manifest themselves in the bodies of their hosts a catalogue of otherness comes to life. The spirits behave in ways appropriate to their respective ethnic groups, social roles, religions, and sex. They may be wanton and undignified, take on superior airs, beg piteously, dance about wildly, speak in brash or coy tones, exhibit any conduct fitting to their type. Spirits may be kings or slaves, prostitutes, nuns, male homosexuals, merchants, Coptic priests, or fierce tribal warriors. When a spirit's chant is sung and all whom it possesses ideally enter trance, it manifests itself in each simultaneously, sometimes presenting different aspects of its character, but always interacting with the audience in strange and sometimes terrifying ways.

To observe possession trance in another is to witness a paradox: a woman who is not who she is—not human, not Hofriyati, not even, in most cases, female. Although the identities of the possessed and her intrusive *zar* are distinct, and it is the aim of the ceremony to cultivate awareness of their distinction in the possessed, for observers this separation of entities is not always easy to maintain. During trance the two are brought into intimate and often perplexing association, and those describing the episode often refer to the woman and her spirit interchangeably. Yet this risk of confusion, this ambiguity, is, I think, key to the aesthetics and therapeutics of *zar* in Hofriyat. Just as when one sees a play, the interpretation of a trance event is never wholly given in the event but must, in part, be constructed anew by each observer, who brings to the moment her own past experiences, present concerns, and critical awareness. But unlike the audience at a play, the Hofriyati observer of possession trance is utterly committed to the literal reality of what she sees. And what she sees is someone at once essential to her own construction of self and a symbol of it, who is also her own sheer antithesis. This thorough paradox, taken with the various properties of the entranced and her spirit, their individual traits

and biographies, and the relations of parody, travesty, and inversion among elements of the episode, makes possible any number of interpretations, deconstructing naturalized associations and temporarily freeing ideation from its moorings in the everyday world. In the course of a ceremony the possessed alternately observes and experiences trance; thus, for an entire evening she is given to see herself and those around her as in a hall of mirrors, the proportions of her selfhood shifting from moment to moment, context to context, now familiar, now alien, now frightening, now bizarre. In the course of her long association with the *zar* there are many such occasions, each affording her the possibility of new insights, refined understandings, and continued growth.

*Zar* (as both possession and performance) is a powerful medium for unchaining thought from the fetters of hegemonic cultural constructs and, to paraphrase Ricoeur (1976), for opening it up in different and possibly illuminating directions. In the possession context, of which trance is an integral part, the self becomes a pure issue, a subject for contemplation, negotiation, and, perhaps, felicitous regeneration.

## notes

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<sup>1</sup>In 1977:  $N = 129$ , 54 possessed and 75 non-possessed; in 1984:  $N = 135$ , 63 possessed and 72 non-possessed.

<sup>2</sup>Of the original 129 women whose status was determined in 1977, 66 (51 percent) were acknowledged to have been possessed when I returned in 1984. Several had since died or left the village, hence the discrepancy with note 1.

<sup>3</sup>For further discussion of such perspectives see Boddy, in press.

<sup>4</sup>Explanations abound for the practice of pharaonic circumcision. See Abdalla 1982; Assaad 1980; Boddy 1982; El Dareer 1982; Gruenbaum 1982; Hayes 1975; McLean 1980.

<sup>5</sup>Such as smoke-bathing, depilation, the painful plaiting of a woman’s hair. For discussion of these, see Boddy 1982 and in press.

<sup>6</sup>The following is summarized from an earlier article (1982).

<sup>7</sup>For others, referred to as *mushahara*, see Kennedy 1978, and Boddy in press.

<sup>8</sup>The metaphor is explicit in villagers’ descriptions of how they dispose of miscarried fetuses and stillbirths (Boddy 1982:692–693).

<sup>9</sup>Following Strathern 1981, female in Hofriyat is constructed figuratively or metaphorically: in same sex contexts femaleness stands for certain things without necessitating reference to maleness.

<sup>10</sup>This pertains as much to the Muslim honor/shame complex in Hofriyat (not discussed here) as to spirit possession.

<sup>11</sup>One of the most important events preceding the wedding feast is presentation of the *shaila* (burden, that which is carried) to the bride by the groom. The main part of the *shaila* is a trousseau consisting of sets of outfits, the greater the number of the sets, the higher the prestige of the donor, and the better the demonstration of his potential to provide for his wife and future children. After the feast the wedding culminates in the symbolic defloration of the bride.

<sup>12</sup>The metaphoric association of women with domestic animals resonates with O’Laughlin’s material from Chad (1974); however, unlike the Mbum, Hofriyat women are not subject to sumptuary restrictions that differ from men’s.

<sup>13</sup>In the early 1970s a girl’s school was opened in the area. Consequently, most of the younger women in the village have some education.

<sup>14</sup>Kapferer’s information on demonic possession in Sri Lanka (1983) is similar to mine in this respect.

<sup>15</sup>This point has been cogently argued by Lambek (1981) for possession in Mayotte, Comoro Islands.

<sup>16</sup>Still, fertility problems, especially when associated with marital difficulty, are most frequently implicated in cases of possession. In 1977 and 1984 respectively, 53.7 percent ( $N = 54$ ) and 46 percent ( $N = 63$ ) of possessed Hofriyat women linked the onset of *zar* illness to such incidents. By contrast, 21.3 percent

( $N = 75$ ) and 18 percent ( $N = 72$ ) of non-possessed women reported ever having experienced fertility and marital problems simultaneously.

<sup>17</sup>However, knowing that her spirits become more active during periods of vulnerability, an adept will take extra care to placate them at such times.

<sup>18</sup>See Kapferer (1983:50) for similar observations about possession in Sri Lanka.

<sup>19</sup>Also noted by Constantinides (1977:66) and Saunders (1977:179) for *zar* in Sudan and Egypt respectively, and Bourguignon (1976:33) for *vodou* in Haiti.

<sup>20</sup>Crapanzano (1973:224, 1980) argues along the same lines with regard to masculine ideals and men possessed by 'Aisha Qandisha in Morocco.

<sup>21</sup>(Cf. Geertz 1973:386 for Bali.) An irony here is that female circumcision has a deleterious effect on fertility from a physiological standpoint. See the *Sudan Fertility Survey 1979* (Democratic Republic of Sudan 1982:56).

<sup>22</sup>Societies with a relational definition of self abound. For examples, see Dumont 1970:8–11; Kleinman 1980 passim; Lindenbaum 1979:37–54; Ohnuki-Tierney 1984:67.

<sup>23</sup>Or, from metonymy to negative metaphor or “what-I-am-not.” Crapanzano (1977:19) notes that, during possession trance, such negative metaphor is briefly transformed into *positive* metonym: the host “becomes” her possessive spirit. Ohnuki-Tierney (1984:87–88, citing Fernandez 1974:125–126 and Lévi-Strauss 1966:150) makes similar observations on the complex transformations between metonym and metaphor with reference to physiomorphism in Japanese illness processes. Such transformations and counter-transformations as both authors note are, I think, crucial to the relationship between illness and identity.

<sup>24</sup>Clearly, the use of “dissociation” and “somatization” in referring to symptoms of possession is problematic: these are not culture-free terms. They are borrowed from Western medicine and as such contain an implicit valuation. As Ohnuki-Tierney (1984:76) observes with regard to illness in Japanese culture, “somatization” implies that the origin of certain physical complaints is ultimately psychodynamic. It suggests a causal chain that comes into play independently of ethnographic realities (an individual *first* experiences psychological distress which is *then* translated into physical symptoms), supposing a linearity that may not, in fact, exist. Moreover, the term “somatization” would locate etiological factors in the body to the neglect of other material and physiological agents in the universe (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984:76). In Hofriyat, as in Japan, these are questionable assumptions.

<sup>25</sup>See also Crapanzano (1977:19) and Lambek n.d.

<sup>26</sup>My information about men who have acknowledged possession, undergone curing ceremonies, and/or acquiesced to their spirits' demands (fewer than 15 in my informants' memory, from the entire three-village area with a population of about 2500) indicates an etiology complementary to that for women. Most are said to have been afflicted as very young children or in utero by spirits which plague their mothers. (This is almost never the case for little girls.) Given the emphasis in Hofriyat on males' autonomy and independence from women, possession illness here might express difficulties in the process of forming and maintaining an appropriate masculine gender identity. The species of *zairan* known to afflict men to the point of illness lend support to this view: all belong to one of two categories—Darawish (Islamic holy men), or Arab (Bedouin and other nomadic pastoralists), and are invariably male. Both spirit types represent extreme expressions of Hofriyati masculine ideals. Thus, a man's *zar* “non-self,” in contrast to that of a woman, exhibits qualities deemed appropriate to his sex. In such cases it could perhaps be said that *zar* deals with the *underdetermination* of an individual's selfhood, though my data are too scant to be more than suggestive on this point.

<sup>27</sup>As Wallace (1959) has so ably demonstrated, how one experiences an altered state of consciousness is strongly influenced by cultural meanings and expectations.

<sup>28</sup>See also Kapferer 1983:201.

<sup>29</sup>Spirits are ambivalent figures, representing exaggerations of village values (for example, piety, dignity, or fertility), while also demonstrating their opposites: exogamous marriage or promiscuous sexuality. *Zairan* in their biographies are liminal: they “mediate between alternative and opposing contexts and are thus important in bringing about their transformation” (Turner 1982:113). In the case of *zar*, transformation takes place in the consciousness of the possessed.

<sup>30</sup>For further examination of women and the *zar* cult, see Boddy in press.

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