

Lost Tribes and Coffee Ceremonies: *Zar* Spirit Possession and the Ethno-Religious Identity of Ethiopian Jews in Israel¹

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The immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel has been steeped in debates over religious authenticity and identity. Throughout the immigration and assimilation process, and even prior to immigration, in Ethiopia, *zar* spirit beliefs and practices have been a fulcrum for contests over the ethno-religious identity of Ethiopian Jews. This paper explores the intersection between *zar* and Judaism in Israel, debates over theology and observance, and the ramifications for the development of Ethiopian Jewish identity, integration, and religious practice.

In 1974, when the last emperor of Ethiopia was overthrown by a Marxist coup, there were approximately 30,000 Ethiopian Jews (Kessler 1982: 10; Quirin 1992: 3)² living in over 500 villages (Salamon 1999: 17) throughout northwest Ethiopia. While claiming a common identity as Jews, they originate from different geographic and linguistic areas in Ethiopia. During the 1974–1991 Marxist revolution in Ethiopia, thousands of Ethiopian Jews fled their villages and journeyed on foot to Sudan, or in later years to Addis Abeba. Several months to several years later, the majority, or over 21,000, of these refugees immigrated to Israel with the help of several major Israeli airlift missions, most notably Operation Moses in 1984 and Operation Solomon in 1991. The airlifts were a disruption of major proportions, injected into a set of circumstances already marked by centuries of change, oppression, and resistance. This was no slow accumulation of change, but an immigrant–refugee situation in which people’s worlds were turned upside down, at times literally overnight. The movement of the Ethiopian Jews to Israel, where they are commonly referred to as *Etiopim*,³ gave rise to debates over their identity, cultural integration, and assimilation. Several years past the era of turbulent, mass migration, these debates continue in both subtle and obvious ways as the *Etiopi* population has grown to over 70,000 scattered throughout Israel (more than one per cent of the total population).

From 1998–1999, I conducted fieldwork into a spirit possession practice among *Etiopim* in Israel called *zar*. I was based in a town between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, called Ramla, that housed a typical *Etiopi* community—one

composed of a mix of recent and veteran immigrants from several regions of Ethiopia. My research eventually took me beyond this town and throughout the region where I interviewed and gathered data on spirit mediums, healers, and ceremonies as well as the psychiatric and popular reactions to spirit possession.

This paper looks at the influence of Jewish, Ethiopian, and Ethiopian-Jewish ethno-religious discourses on the processes of immigration and absorption through the lens of *zar* spirit possession. The processes of immigration and integration of Ethiopian Jews have been shaped by ethno-religious traditions ranging from the origin and diaspora stories that establish the social contract among Jews worldwide, to the Judaic influences on Israeli law, particularly that concerning immigration. These stories, traditions, and laws and the messages they relate permeate people's daily behaviour and identity. *Zar* is itself a practice that has developed along the boundaries of socio-political differences, religious beliefs, and cultural interactions, and continues to do so in Israel.

The remainder of this article questions how *zar* is understood and enacted at the nexus of religious and ethnic identity in this era of globalization. It explores the ways by which authority is constructed and knowledge conveyed among these overlapping and, at times, competing discourses on *zar* and Jewish identity. These discourses are behavioural as well as linguistic, sometimes covert, and carried out on a daily basis as well as during specific rituals. *Zar* and Judaic discourses and practices frequently appear in contradiction to one another and are usually replete with what would eticly be identified as paradox. Nevertheless, they co-exist, articulated by social actors engaged in a dynamic process of interpretation, reconciliation, and resistance that at once creates and overrides the apparent conflicts.

Israel is one of the obvious places where religion is intricately bound up with ethnicity and nationalism. *Etiopi* ethnic identity and *zar* are marked by their attachments to a religious structure that has moulded the experience of immigration and consequential culture change. This paper draws on ideas of religious power (Boddy 1989; Gomm 1975; Lewis 1989; Morsy 1991) to analyse *zar*'s relationship to Judaism and to develop ideas concerning the relationship between ethnic and religious identity in Israel. Among the many issues of globalization, immigrant groups face the challenge of maintaining cultural continuity and integrity while adapting to different environments. Processes of ethnic identification and collective remembering (Connerton 1989; Malkki 1995) come into play. Ethnicity, like Anderson's (1983) conception of the nation and Handler and Linnekin's (1984) explanation of tradition, is not a fixed entity. Rather, ethnicity is a creative strategy of identification and behaviour that marks boundaries between groups and that can be used to secure economic resources and ease social transitions (Gold and Paine 1984; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983; Silverman 1991; Sollors 1986; Stern 1991). Said (1978) and Bhabha (1994), too, encourage exploration into ethnicity and the relationship between Self and Other and the mechanics of asymmetrical power relations in multi-cultural settings. Further, Bhabha's (1994) approach

recognizes that pathways of cultural interaction are not always clear-cut, but often involve contradictions and uncertainty. As *zar* articulates ethnic contrasts and shared identity, it transcends the uncertainties and hybrid cultural phenomena experienced by Ethiopian immigrants in Israel.

Zar

A story known to Ethiopian Jews, among others, tells of the thirty children of Adam and Eve and how the fifteen most beautiful children became invisible. Thinking to protect her most beautiful children from divine envy, Eve tried to hide them in the Garden of Eden, out of God's sight. God, all-seeing and angered by Eve's actions, declared that these children would remain invisible for eternity. The fifteen unhidden children became the ancestors of humanity, while the invisible children became the forefathers of a class of envious and unpredictable spirits called *zar*. Since that time, humans have been plagued by the caprice of the *zar*, subjected to illness and misfortune at the jealous whim of the spirits. Many Ethiopian Jews believed that in Israel, the *zar* spirits would cease to afflict them. Jerusalem, for the Jews of Ethiopia, as well as Jews in the diaspora worldwide, was imagined to be a homeland of peace and prosperity, flowing with milk (symbolizing health) and honey (connoting sweetness), where illness and *zar* spirits did not exist. From the mid 1980s to the present, this belief has been put to the test as Ethiopian Jews immigrated to Israel. In fact, *zar* spirits, beliefs, and practices continue to influence people's lives and fortunes—as acute spirit possession as well as in more diaphanous forms, such as daily coffee rituals (*bunna*), fortune-telling consultations, popular films, and traditional celebrations.

Possession by a *zar* spirit is identified through physiological symptoms, and diagnosis normally occurs after other medical options have been exhausted without effect. In areas where *zar* is prevalent,⁴ women past the age of puberty are the majority of sufferers. In Ethiopia, however, there is a greater proportion of men afflicted with *zar* than in other regions. The prototypical signal of a *zar* attack is the appearance of symptoms, most commonly headaches, lethargy, or infertility, which are not cured after several visits to other types of healers including biomedical doctors. Eventually, the sufferer is diagnosed as being afflicted by a *zar* spirit. Once the illness is diagnosed as *zar*, therapy begins with the initiation ceremony of the afflicted individual into a cult group of others who have suffered similar ailments. The initiate attends a *zar* ceremony where she will hopefully fall into a trance, allowing the *zar* to enter her body and reveal its identity and wishes to the other participants through movement and speech. After a few minutes in the trance, the new medium returns to normal consciousness. The spirit is not exorcised, but rather a relationship is developed with the spirit in order to prevent future occurrences of illness. This relationship is based on an agreement or series of agreements whereby the individual accepts to undertake certain activities, which may include performing certain rituals, attending regular *zar* ceremonies, wearing special

clothing or jewellery, ingesting specific foods or other substances such as tobacco, or altering his or her marital status to appease the spirit. Through this initiation, the sufferer is transformed into a recognized spirit medium. Over the course of a lifetime, a person may acquire several *zar* spirits, each with its particular demands.

Zar functions in a wide range of crisis-oriented contexts including infertility, role clashes, marriage difficulties, and in response to intense social and cultural change (Ashkanan 1991; Boddy 1988, 1989; Constantinides 1979; Ferchiou 1991; Hurriez 1991; Kahana 1985; Kennedy 1967; Kenyon 1995; Lewis 1989, 1991; Natvig 1991). *Zar* illness and therapy, therefore, can represent a method of coping with a disruptive condition—whether it is physiologically, psychologically, socially, or supernaturally defined in Western parlance. For instance, one would expect *zar* to intensify in the midst of the disruptions inherent in immigrant and refugee circumstances. Such trends are difficult to measure due to a lack of reliable statistics for *zar* participation in Ethiopia prior to immigration. Nevertheless, in Israel, *zar* trances did occur outside of appropriate ceremonial contexts during the early years of immigration (Arieli and Ayche 1994) to a greater degree than they do now. Today, both the processes of assimilation and the re-establishment of ceremonial networks, practitioners, and facilities have affected the incidence of focused *zar* ceremonies. On the one hand, assimilation has brought about a decline in obvious *zar* participation (though *zar* is still incorporated in many people's lives in subtle, nonexplicit ways). The re-establishment of specialists and social networks, on the other hand, has reproduced the necessary contexts for ceremonies, making them feasible once again. Personal life circumstances and their interpretations continue to direct the appearance of *zar* across the *Etiopi* community.

Identity Contests

In studying Ethiopian Jews, one quickly becomes mired in the debates and alternative historical theories surrounding the origins of this people and their connection to Judaism. Such theories range from propositions that Ethiopian Jews comprise one of the original lost Jewish tribes, to those that trace their existence to more recent migrations, to others that claim their descent from King Solomon's court, to those that argue that they emerged from a Judaized Christian sect. Though mention of Ethiopian Jews in Jewish sources can be found as early as the 9th century, the larger Jewish community only began to interact with Ethiopian Jews in earnest in the mid 20th century, after a century of calls for action by a few Jewish advocates in Europe and Palestine. From the 1950s onwards, European, American, and Israeli Jews organized educational missions to the Jews of Ethiopia, introducing more recent customs and holidays, teaching rudimentary Hebrew, and solidifying the membership of Ethiopian Jews in the global Jewish community. For several decades until the late 1980s and 1990s, the question of origins dominated scholarly and activist

publications concerning the *Etiopim*. Questions of religious authenticity have had ramifications for the politics of immigrating to Israel. *Etiopim* have also strongly reacted to suggestions that their practice of Judaism is somehow insufficient or that they are not really Jews.

For the entire time depth of their collective memory, *Etiopim* have identified themselves as Jewish and have weathered prejudice and persecution in Ethiopia for being so. Over the course of centuries, Ethiopia developed into a predominantly Muslim and Christian land, and a minority group, known in more recent years as the *Beta Israel*, emerged. This group was defined by its economic and political relationship to local Christian communities and by its adherence to early Biblical, Jewish practices, such as following the dietary laws of *kashrut*, observing a Saturday Sabbath, and celebrating holidays described in the Five Books of Moses. Divested of land by an Ethiopian Christian ruler in the fifteenth century, the *Beta Israel* became a caste of tenant farmers and specialized in metalworking, weaving, and pottery.

From the earliest historical times to the present, *Etiopim* have stood in contrast to their Christian neighbours. They may have shared a similar ritual or ceremonial style with them, much as the Jews of Germany adopted the liturgical melodies of their Christian neighbours or Arab Jews were influenced by the ritual practices of their neighbours, but they maintained a strictly separate identity founded on daily religious behaviour, such as following certain laws of purity and celebrating separate holidays. Spirit phenomena were a salient feature of Christian-Jewish relationships in Ethiopia. Social separation between the two groups was perpetuated by a combination of mutually supporting factors: economic specialization, *Beta Israel* purity laws, and Ethiopian Christian beliefs in a class of vampire-like spirits called *buda*. *Zar* systems developed concomitantly with these other elements. *Zar* spirits and rituals today continue to reflect ideas about the differences in identity between Ethiopian Jews and their Christian, Muslim, and pagan neighbours.

In terms of origins, most Jews, like *Etiopim*, are hard pressed to prove by the standards of academic scholarship that their distant ancestors were Jewish; nevertheless, they are accepted as such. In addition to historical considerations, it is crucial to weigh *Etiopim* accounts of their Jewish identity and to remember that (1) rabbinic legal (*halachic*) decisions have confirmed Ethiopian Jews as Jewish;⁵ (2) the influence of Jewish educational missions from the early 20th century onwards had generations ago begun to assimilate Ethiopian Jewish practices to the mainstream; and (3) *Etiopim* continue to move either towards *halachic* observance or towards a secular Jewish Israeli identity.

This does not mean, however, that arguments over their Jewish standing or that of other Ethiopian groups claiming Jewish descent have ceased. Research into the origins of Ethiopian Jews has been fuelled by political and philosophical considerations. The Jewish approach to Ethiopian Jews has been influenced by the long-standing Jewish belief in the in-gathering of exiles, the nineteenth-century rise of racism, and twentieth-century political and economic interests of Israel and its responsibilities as a self-defined Jewish

nation. As the culmination of decades of research, debates, and missions, Israel intervened in the mid 1980s and early 1990s, airlifting approximately 24,000 Ethiopian Jews out of Sudan and Ethiopia and resettling them in Israel. By that point, for political and religious purposes the identity of Ethiopian Jews as Jewish had been established. Nevertheless, these debates continue to rage within the *Etiopi* community as well as in the Israeli and rabbinic courts, government offices, and public field. What emerges is a contest of perspectives, each with its own rules of reasoning and standards of proof.

Religious Observance, Convergence, and Contest

Mainstream Judaism is not specifically opposed to the existence of *zar* spirits or to practices that do not interfere with Jewish law (*halachah*). There is a range of *Etiopi* adherence to Jewish religious law. In general, Ethiopian Jewish practices were strictly based on the Five Books of Moses (the *Torah*, or *Orit*, as the Ethiopian Jewish version, written in Ge'ez, a liturgical language of Ethiopia, is called). Consequently, where the form of Judaism practised by Ethiopian Jews in Ethiopia diverged from mainstream Judaism concerned rabbinic developments of the Talmudic and later periods, specifically Oral Law and the more recent adoption of certain customary practices as law. Those *halachic* practices that resonate with Jewish practices from Ethiopia without contradiction are most typically observed among *Etiopim* today in Israel, such as *Shabbat*, observance of dietary laws, circumcision of boy infants, and observance of the holidays. Some traditional Ethiopian Jewish practices had already begun to adjust towards mainstream Judaism in Ethiopia under the guidance of Israeli, European, and American missions and educational programmes.

The current repertoire of *Etiopi* Judaism has been shaped and transmitted through several channels. Parents pass down their own practices, which sometimes fade in the light of official educational programmes. Pressure from peers of different bents and backgrounds and global and local mass media also convey strategies of religious observance. The majority of *Etiopi* parents opt to send their children to schools with religious programming. Since the initial waves of immigration, many children have attended boarding schools, which has had an enormous impact on the lifeways of the attendees. Over the last several decades, mainstream *halachic* practices have been adopted by some of the younger and older *Etiopim* generations in Israel. Wearing skull caps, following Jewish laws of marriage and divorce, and changes in the performance of prayer are a few examples. On the other hand, much of the younger generation and some of the middle generation reject religious observance in favour of a more secular Israeli identity. As in many Israeli families, *Etiopim* families may include observant as well as non-observant members.

In efforts to affirm their identity as Jews and thereby secure their positions as citizens of Israel, *Etiopim* have been challenged to reconcile contradictions between their traditional practices of Judaism and the dominant form of observance in Israel. *Zar* beliefs and ceremonies are interwoven throughout

this struggle. Discussed below are some illustrative examples of this intertwining of beliefs, behaviour, and controversies within the practices of tattooing, menstrual separation, prayer, and Sabbath and holiday observance. A space of practice centering around ethnic identity, political belonging, and religious authority emerges.

Tattooing and Menstrual Separation

Zar emerges as an underlying factor in the contemporary religious issues surrounding tattooing and menstrual separation. One of the first things an outsider notices about Ethiopian women of the immigrant generation is that most of them are tattooed—usually on their hands, faces, necks, or some combination thereof. Popular depictions of spirit mediums emphasize such facial and neck tattoos; however, not all women with tattoos are actively involved with *zar*. Some forms of tattooing are also used medicinally and therefore form part of the medical environment in which *zar* falls.

The practice of tattooing, common among Ethiopian women, has proved problematic in terms of Jewish law, which forbids tattooing. Girls often receive their first tattoos, usually a circular design on the top part of the left hand, as early as nine years of age. One informant reported sneaking off with girlfriends to the tattoo artist and returning home to her mother's anger—'because Jews are not supposed to have tattoos.'

Tattoos are blue or blackish in colour and are commonly placed on the hand, forehead, face, and neck. Circles (2 cm or less), or designs based on circles, such as circles with lines radiating from them, circles with crosses attached to the bottom, dots, and floral designs are the most common. Neck tattoos are usually in the form of concentric lines following the line of the chin, like necklaces. Some are more elaborate, with small perpendicular lines added to each row. Many more recent immigrants bear tattoos of crosses, further complicating their acceptance as Jews. Those who do usually indicate that they were physically forced to receive these tattoos or did so in order to avoid persecution. Others stated that crosses and tattoos in general were simply fashionable.

There is a general disagreement over the purpose of tattooing. One young woman (whose mother has neck tattoos) claimed that there is a medicinal purpose to tattooing and to the far less common practice of scarification (the scars are usually in the form of lines on the eye lids and beneath the brows). Her slightly older cousin confirmed that scarification and gum tattooing (in order to promote 'luck' or health for the teeth) were medicinal. She disagreed, however, with the suggestion that other tattoos, especially neck tattoos, which are reported to prevent goitre (Anteby 1996: 158), were medicinal. The elder cousin strongly countered that there was no such reason for the tattoos, that they were simply in style in Ethiopia and enhanced beauty. In the end, the younger cousin conceded. Perhaps this indicates a deeper correlation in Ethiopian thought between beauty and health. The majority of immigrants

have accommodated themselves to *halachic* ideals and no longer practice tattooing and scarification.

Another change in behaviour related to immigration to Israel, religious injunction, and *zar* is the practice of menstrual separation. Both Ethiopian and rabbinic traditions developed customs based on the Biblical injunctions against having sexual intercourse with women during their menstrual period and after giving birth. Whether post-menstrual or post-partum, the end of the bleeding time and resumption of sexual relations is marked by a brief period of bloodless days, followed by immersion in a naturally fed pool or body of water. In Ethiopia, women retired to special huts during their menstrual periods and after giving birth. When their period of separation ended, they immersed in a flowing, natural body of water before returning to normal activities. Immersion was also required of both men and women in Ethiopia if they came into physical contact with non-Jews. In Ethiopia, Jews were said to smell like water due to the perception of their constant immersions.

In rabbinic Judaism, the practice of menstrual-related separation does not begin until after marriage. Husbands and wives avoid all touch while the woman is menstruating, and after seven days past the end of her menses, the woman immerses in the *mikvah* (a special pool fed by natural waters), after which she and her husband resume physical contact. Obviously, these practices share similar roots with the Ethiopian practice of separation, but the significant changes in use of space (i.e. absence of menstrual huts and limited access to natural, flowing bodies of water) that confronted Ethiopian immigrants upon their arrival have basically made their observance of menstrual separation impossible. People have come to accept this state of affairs with trepidation and remorse.

Complicating matters is the idea that *zar* are attracted by blood and can harm people by becoming angry and inflicting illness. People are at risk of being attacked by a *zar* if they are injured and bleeding or experiencing menstrual or post-partum blood loss. Leslau (1964: 36) reports that the word for 'blood' is taboo at *zar* ceremonies. It is especially dangerous for menstruating women to come into contact with spirit mediums and to enter their homes at these times, since it could potentially incite the anger of the *zar*. Rather, people try to keep their homes and clothing clean of blood. Beneficial contact with spirits can only occur in blood-free places. Parallels between the relationship of medium and *zar* and that of lovers or husbands and wives further deepen these associations of blood, ritual immersion, and proper relationships.

Prayer and the Sabbath

In addition to underlying the controversies over tattooing and menstrual separation, *zar* factors into current prayer styles and Sabbath observance. At one time, the rituals of *zar* ceremonies shared stylistic features with Ethiopian prayer services in terms of spatial divisions, stylized movements, music, and

certain ritual objects. Within Ethiopia itself a ritualistic style emerges among the ceremonies of Jews, Christians, and other religions and spirit rituals, including *zar*. For instance, spreading grasses on the floor, a component of Jewish and Christian *zar* and coffee ceremonies (*bunna*) was also common in Ethiopian Jewish prayer houses during certain holidays (Shelemay 1986) and Sidamo spirit possession and household ceremonies (Brøgger 1986). Both Christian and Jewish *zar* resonate with official religious practices: (a) in the bowing that accompanies entering a church, Jewish prayer house, or ceremonial room of a spirit medium, (b) the division of space into three areas, with the innermost space marked by a higher density of ritual indicating greater sanctum, (c) the centrality of music and incorporation of specific stylized movements, (d) the use of altar-like equipment, such as replicas of the ark of the covenant and the coffee table and (e) the donning of decorated umbrellas and cloaks by religious and *zar* leaders.

These elements have been maintained in the *zar* ceremony in Israel, as traditional Ethiopian prayer services and holiday celebrations have faded, replaced by their mainstream Jewish counterpart. Formal prayer is one area that reveals the tuning of Ethiopian practices to mainstream, *halachic* custom, resulting in hybrid practices. In the last few years Ethiopian synagogues have opened in some towns. As in other Jewish orthodox synagogues, services are more frequently attended by men, and men and women sit in separate sections. Most men now don prayer shawls when called for at certain services. Services are led by a *qes* ('priest'), *qes-rabbi*, or *rabbi*. Services that I attended were conducted in Hebrew, though in other parts of the country, Ge'ez services are still held.

Men are the official ritual specialists and authorities in Judaism as practised in Ethiopia and in Israel. Women are excluded from the priesthood and the orthodox rabbinate. Acting as a *zar* leader and healer can afford both women and unordained men an authority similar to that of the official priests and rabbis of Ethiopian Jewish society. Very few men and women pursue this course, however, and the decision to do so is not solely their choice, but follows from ancestral participation in *zar* and the spirits' selection. In the final analysis, respect ultimately comes from being a good, caring, and generous person, whether you are a healer, priest, farmer, or parent.

Like the prayer services, *Shabbat* (Sabbath) observance is currently a blend of Ethiopian and Israeli custom. In addition, clashes between the prohibitions of *Shabbat* and the prescriptions of *zar*, especially concerning the preparation of coffee and other practices involving fire, have been a source of concern for *zar* sufferers and religious officials. The traditional method of preparing coffee in Ethiopia and among *Etiopim* is called *bunna*. It is a major focus of the ceremonies and ritual performed for the *zar* spirits and has a strong association with *zar*. *Bunna* involves roasting coffee beans in front of guests so that they can inhale the aroma, an act pleasing to the spirits and thought to promote health. The beans are then ground, steeped in boiling water, and the coffee is served. The steeping and serving processes are repeated three times, incense is often burned, and a light meal or snack is consumed.

Shabbat observance among the majority of *Etiopim* is strict, even among those who are otherwise untraditional. On *Shabbat*, people do not travel, cook, or use objects forbidden by *halachah*, such as writing implements, matches, and most electrical appliances. The heat source needed to roast coffee beans, a central step in creating blessings and holding a proper *bunna* ceremony, is not permitted. Seeman (1997) has reported an incident where a woman suffering from powerful caffeine headaches abstained from making coffee on *Shabbat* for fear of being seen as not Jewish and subsequently deported. For people with *zar* whose spirits require *bunna* in exchange for good health, not being able to roast beans and prepare coffee on *Shabbat* has always posed a serious dilemma.

In 1998, an Israeli newspaper interviewed three *qesoch* (Ethiopian Jewish ‘priests’) regarding *zar*. Two of them reaffirmed the prohibition of preparing coffee on *Shabbat* and advised prayer instead. The third cited a *halachic* pretext that allows activities otherwise forbidden on *Shabbat* to be performed in cases of life or death to support the preparation of *bunna* by spirit mediums (Nah 1998). Through their declarations, the *qesoch* affirmed their identity as Jewish religious officials in a way which would be more acceptable to the empowered religious authorities in Israel.

In fact, Jewish law allows for the preparation of instant coffee on *Shabbat* as long as the water has been heated prior to *Shabbat*. The fact that coffee, but not *bunna*—a quintessential sign of Ethiopianness—can be made on *Shabbat* exposes a distinction between Ethiopian and Israeli practices. Furthermore, conforming to Israeli *Shabbat* practices is a move on the part of Ethiopians to establish themselves as members of the Israeli and overall Jewish communities. Preparing *bunna* on *Shabbat* is not a problem which exists in isolation. It is set against a background of debates over the authenticity of Ethiopian Jewish practices and their claims to a Jewish identity.

The Sigd Holiday: A Meeting of Authority and Belief

Today, *Etiopim* celebrate a combination of Jewish, Israeli, and Ethiopian-Jewish holidays. Of the last, the Sigd holiday is still observed by almost half of the *Etiopi* population in Israel, though the holiday’s content has changed. The 1998 Sigd celebration illustrates the blending of Ethiopian Jewish and Israeli practices and the connections among *zar*, religious authority, ritual practice, politicking, and ethnic identity.

Sigd is celebrated 50 days after Yom Kippur. In Ethiopia, each Jewish village had celebrated this holiday with a procession and *Orit* reading at a local hill or mountainside. Sigd is said to have numerous meanings: It commemorates Moses’s reception of the ten commandments at Mount Sinai and may have marked the departure of the monastic community in more distant times. Finally, it has been a renewal of the covenant between the Ethiopian Jews and God and a traditional time of penitence and fasting (Ben Dor 1987; Shelemay 1986). *Etiopi* religious authorities debated over whether or not Sigd should still be celebrated now that Ethiopian Jews had returned to Jerusalem. Eventually,

they decided in the affirmative. The last several years have seen Sigd celebrations with upwards of 30,000 participants at a small, hillside park in Jerusalem that overlooks the Dome of the Rock and the Old City. While few Ethiopian immigrants actually live in Jerusalem—their ultimate destination—it has become the site of the Sigd celebration.

In 1998, Sigd coincided with the General Assembly of the Jewish Agency (an international Jewish organization that works largely with Jews of the diaspora and on immigration to Israel). A focus of the Jewish Agency's meeting in Jerusalem was the immigration of the *Falas Mura* (a group of Ethiopians whose claim of Jewish descent is under question). There were protests in front of the General Assembly meeting headquarters the day before. As in years past, the procession and blessings of the colourfully garbed *Etiopi* priests (*gesoch*) were intermingled with political speeches by Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian members of the Knesset, the Prime Minister, and the head of the Jewish Agency. The predominant language of these speeches, in contrast to the blessings, was Hebrew.

Sigd, as an increasingly public and advertised event, is replete with themes of identity, religious authority, and political contestation and conciliation. The assembly of such large numbers of *Etiopim* has also become a prime context for political statements. Demonstrations the day before and political speeches that day concerning the fate of the *Falas Mura* foreground the issues of identity and acceptance as Jews faced by all Jews of Ethiopian descent at some point in their lives, especially with respect to the debates leading up to the massive immigrations in the 1980s and 1990s and subsequent accommodations. The fact that the *Etiopi* community has chosen to continue to distinguish itself through unique religious holidays in Israel speaks to their desire to be recognized as a distinct subculture with long-standing, valid traditions and to the perseverance of beliefs and practices developed in Ethiopia, despite pressures to assimilate in Israel. With the firmer establishment of an 'Israeli' identity, it is now possible to celebrate and share in the diversity of Israeli subcultures. The demographics of attendance, meanwhile, reflected lack of interest, yet tolerance, on the part of the majority of non-Ethiopian Israelis.

Another potential contradiction was presented by the fact that Rahamim,⁶ a well-known spirit medium, amulet writer, and community leader, provided the umbrellas carried by the priests for this celebration—this despite the fact that the priesthood is officially opposed to spirit possession. Amulet writers, however, were once an integral part of the Ethiopian Jewish religious hierarchy. They chanted at prayer services and were trained in Ethiopian Judaism, but not ordained as priests (Shelemay 1986). Their official religious training provided them with the knowledge and tools to write amulets, while their fading status in the Ethiopian Jewish religious system encouraged them to pursue careers as amulet writers and healers. It may therefore not be so surprising after all that Rahamim is an important contributor to official religious ceremonies.

The conflict between the priesthood and *zar* stems not from cosmological disagreement, but from considerations of actual *zar* practice. The existence of *zar* spirits does not contradict the dominant theology (in fact the most common origin story for the *zar* is Biblically derived). Rather, religious leaders have been concerned that the spirits might demand preparation of *bunna* (Ethiopian-style coffee) on *Shabbat*, which would violate the prohibition against kindling fire. They also feared that participating in certain aspects of *zar* rituals would encourage fraternization with Ethiopian Christian *zar* diviners and healers. People might then transgress the stringent rules prohibiting physical contact between Ethiopian Jews and Christians. In terms of preventing interaction between Ethiopian Jew and Christian, the *qesoch* act, as does the rabbinate (with regard to establishing guidelines of Jewish identity for the purposes of immigration and marriage laws, for instance), to police ethnic boundaries.

The Social Body and the Other

Interestingly, while Jewish *qesoch* viewed *zar* as too Christian a practice, Ethiopian Christian priests viewed it as inherently unChristian. Neither overtly supported working with spirits, and this may have contributed to the 'secretive' feel of *zar*. Actually, Jewish and Christian *zar* are rather similar. They are consistent in the processual order of spirit possession ceremonies, the centrality of coffee, the mechanisms of trance, and the general framework of knowledge surrounding these practices, *zar* illnesses, and therapies (Leiris 1989; Messing 1959; Young 1970). The overarching religious context, whether it is Jewish or Christian, does however modify the structure of *zar* to include different spirits and ritual aspects. In addition to the greater variation in Ethiopian *zar*, both Christian and Jewish variants of *zar* involve many more men (though women are still seen as the central participants) than in Muslim-contextualized *zar*. This may be a result of the greater restrictions on women in formal Muslim worship than in either of the other two Ethiopian contexts.

Additionally, *zar* spirits differ between Jewish and Christian traditions in their names and identities, span of religious affiliations, and manner in which they parallel the ethnic composition of the human world. Although the compendium of *zar* spirits mentioned by Leiris (1989) and compiled by Messing (1959) among the Amhara include pagan, Christian, and Muslim spirits, the spirits I encountered among the *Etiopim* were only either pagan, Muslim, or unspecified. There were no specifically Christian examples. (While this may be a limitation of my research, I have come across no reports by other researchers describing Christian *zar* spirits among the Jewish Ethiopians). Also interesting is the fact that no Jewish *zar* spirits appear in the sources on either Jewish or Christian Ethiopian *zar*. While the *zar* at first seem to reflect the social milieu of humans (as they do in Janice Boddy's [1989] descriptions) the Jewish component is curiously lacking.

The lack of interaction with specifically named Jewish *zar* spirits is filled for the Ethiopian Amhara Christian community by an entity termed *buda*. A *buda*

is an evil spirit that may transform itself into a hyena and preys upon the blood of humans. For centuries, Ethiopian Amhara Christians have accused Ethiopian Jews of being manifestations of *buda*. Raw or bloodied meat, a delicacy in Ethiopia, was shunned by Ethiopian Jews. *Buda*, as understood by the Amhara, eats only charred meat, and they view this as a signal of its Jewish nature (Jewish dietary laws forbid the consumption of blood). *Buda* fears supported the ethnic division of the Ethiopian Jewish and Christian communities. Ethiopian Jews meanwhile deny their identification with the *buda*, but recognize the existence of such creatures. The *buda* may, from the Christian perspective, complement the *zar* spirits of other religious and ethnic affinities, rounding out their reflection of the human world.

These phenomena illuminate spirit possession as an encounter with the Other as conceived by each community. When we make distinctions between Self and Other, we do so primarily in the human or human-like realm. The Other must be similar enough to the Self to be seen as a threat, perhaps representing a community's alter ego, or the antithesis of morality. In *zar*, the spirits are not a supernatural or necessarily natural force, but the obverse of humanity. People and *zar* spirits have the same mythical origins. They are both descendants of the first man and woman, unlike supernatural beings such as angels. The disembodied, invisible nature of the spirits carries their Otherness to a deeper level, but they remain close enough to their human counterparts in their origins, desires, and relationships to represent a threat through their ambiguity.

Possession represents a controlled transgression of the boundary between communities and ethnicities. The closed Ethiopian Jewish community, separated from its Christian neighbours, forbidden to intermarry with anyone non-Jewish, allows representatives of these communities to enter the bounded community through a transgression of the physical body (Douglas 1966), behaviour, and consciousness. Through *zar*, people temporarily embody difference and literally come to terms with it. Their behaviour is reshaped to allow forays into this Other world from that moment forth as people afflicted by *zar* perform daily rituals based on what the different *zar* spirits characteristically demand (e.g. listening to Muslim prayers (Anteby 1996: 468), chewing *ch'at* (a leaf with mild stimulant properties), smoking tobacco, and wearing special clothing or jewelry). Such activities are confined to a special space where they do not threaten the standing social order.

In *zar*, oppressive spirits are identified with members from other ethnic categories, thereby synthesizing the oppressor and the Other. As suggested by Irwin-Zarecka (1994: 60), 'to construct a sense of community, one almost inevitably needs the presence of the Other; the oppressor serves this role very well indeed.' Lambek, too, finds that in Malagasy spirit possession, the Other crystallizes. He explains that

given cultural form, altered states of consciousness provide a medium for the transmission of messages that are not apparent in the ordinary everyday world of

'unaltered' consciousness. They help to establish the meaning and meaningfulness of culture by providing controlled experience of what it is not (Lambek 1980: 183).

The certainty of spirits explains illness and misfortune while reflecting social conflicts and offering a mechanism for their resolution. That which is so non-Self, in that one's consciousness is altered and one's well-being is undermined, is expressed in a familiar idiom: the stereotypes of Other humans in the local or historical context of the community. Possession then becomes an instance of embodying the Other, of resolving the threat. Indeed, in the negotiations that occur between the *zar* spirits and the therapy participants, and through the performance of agreed acts by the victim, this amelioration of threat is exactly what is supposed to occur.

The distinction of Other, however, does not supply an adequate explanation for the characteristics of spirits and their relations to humans. For instance, why then do Christian Ethiopians get possessed by Christian *zar* spirits, but Ethiopian Jews commonly do not? In addition to the components of Otherness, each spirit identity symbolizes local conceptions of power, lending authority to the spirits, their declarations and demands, and their adherents. In this case, Muslims invaded the region in which Ethiopian Jews resided in the sixteenth century. Pagan peoples, as slaves in Northern Ethiopia, both drew attention to the superior status of Jews and Christians and represented dangerous forces unleashed by the inequalities of subordination. These spirits, when appeased, were brought under control, and their power could be a means of protection or elucidation—guarding the home, teaching hospitality, promoting good fortune and telling the future, or passing on medicinal expertise. Ethiopian Amhara Christians who controlled large-scale political and economic processes for centuries, while good candidates for representing power, perhaps represent too much of a threat to a distinct Ethiopian Jewish identity to be included as spirits.

***Zar* as Religion? Judaism as Ethnicity?**

In addressing the issue of how *zar* works with a Jewish religious system, it becomes clear that *zar* is not in competition with Judaism, but is rather a set of beliefs and practices that emerges at the crossroads of the invisible and the visible, that is of the social, natural, and supernatural worlds. Theories proposing that *zar* is a peripheral religious cult in contradiction to official, central cults (Lewis 1989) fall apart in the face of this Israeli example, where *zar* adherents participate in mainstream or Ethiopian forms of Judaism without conflict. Lambek (1993: 66) writes that the people of Mayotte

claim to view possession as first an imposition on them, a cause of sickness. And if they also view it as something more than this, as a source of knowledge, of pleasure, and of support, they never mistake the unpredictable, quirky, and frequently ill-tempered, all too personal spirits they call upon for the impersonal, omnipotent, omniscient, and supremely moral God of Islam.

Similarly, the belief in and practice of *zar* does not contradict people's fundamental, Jewish beliefs in one supreme God. The *zar* spirits are not considered gods, nor even supernatural, but rather humans altered by the divine in a mythical time. *Zar* is a way of dealing with invisible forces, fortune, misfortune, illness, and well-being. Ultimately, it does not contradict theology. In practice, as Lambek (1993: 55) writes, 'such contradictions as arise are largely situational and, for most people, easily transcended with little sense of paradox'—a characteristic of modernization in general.

Opposition from religious authority does arise, however, when ethnic boundaries are threatened. From the work of Kaplan (1992), Quirin (1992), and Shelemay (1986), it is apparent that the distinction between Ethiopian Jewish and Christian identity was overtly understood and expressed in religious terms that were extended to aspects of economic and social organization. Primarily, the distinction between Ethiopian Christian and Ethiopian Jew, its creation, and maintenance falls most clearly under what would academically be categorized as ethnicity. The identity of the community was largely formed by not being the Other. The ethnic boundary was determined in part by religious custom, in part by physical isolation, and in part by economic specialization. At times, *zar* may have encouraged lapses in these regulations, thus prompting opposition from religious authorities, because in their transgression they would threaten the distinct identity of the community. These same authorities, nonetheless, did not and do not deny the existence or potency of *zar*.

Today's concerns over ethnic and religious boundaries continue to divide Jewish Ethiopians from Christian. Furthermore, they strive to establish a shared brotherhood between Ethiopian and other Jews. The ethno-religious charter of the Jewish people has strongly shaped the immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Once in Israel, *Etiopim* continue to affirm and recreate their Jewish identity while relocating their experiences of being Ethiopian. Both individuals and the larger *Etiopi* community are involved daily in public and private assessments of their Jewishness. This affects their perception of whether or not they will be allowed to remain in the country they have traditionally envisioned as home.

Throughout the history of the Jewish people, the division between religious and ethnic identity has waxed and waned. Some groups have chosen to assimilate more to their cultural surroundings than others, and these trends have in turn affected the style and rules of religious practice. Judaism, religiously and culturally, has not been monolithic since the earliest dispersions into different lands. This diaspora has necessitated that Judaism become rigid in some respects and flexible in others. Overall, Jewish religion and Jewish religious authorities have played key roles in defining Jewish ethnic identity throughout the world. The categorization of issues as religious, social, political, or economic is a more recent phenomenon. In the not-so-distant past, and in some communities to this day, the distinction is not made. Similarly, for *Etiopim*, *zar* and Judaism, health, relationships, the nature of the world, economics, and worship have only recently been divided. *Zar* is not only a

religious phenomenon, it is medical, ethical, historical, economic, and social, just as Judaism is not only a religion, but a social charter, ethical system, and identity.

1. Funding for this research was provided by the Fulbright doctoral scholarship programme, Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, and National Foundation for Jewish Culture.
2. In the mid-nineteenth century, the estimated population of Ethiopian Jews ranged from 80,000 to 250,000. By the early twentieth century, famine and war had reduced this number to 50,000 (Quirin 1992: 3).
3. The people who immigrated from Ethiopia to Israel in the 1980s and 1990s have been known by many names—most commonly *Falasha*, *Beta Israel*, and Ethiopian Jew. Each name conveyed a message about who these people were and how they were related to those around them in particular historical contexts. Scholarly accounts of Jews in Ethiopia employed the term *Falasha* for centuries, until it was discovered that *Falasha* is a derogatory appellation. The name used by the people themselves was *Beta Israel*, which literally means ‘house of Israel’ in Amharic. Since the *Beta Israel* have immigrated to Israel, this name has fallen out of use. ‘Ethiopian Jew’ is often used by the general American, European, and Israeli publics, drawing attention to the fact that they represent first and foremost a particular kind of Jew in contrast to Jews of other ethnicities (e.g. Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Indian). Seeman (1997) refers to them as ‘Ethiopian Israelis,’ a term which parallels ‘African-American’ or ‘Italian-American,’ but which is not in circulation in Israel today.

I have decided to use the Hebrew term *Etiopi* (literally ‘Ethiopian’) and its variants (masculine plural: *Etiopim*; feminine singular: *Etiopit*; and feminine plural: *Etiopiot*) since these were the words used in daily conversation among both Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian members of the Israeli community. I also chose *Etiopi* because, as a Hebrew word, it marks the fact that I am talking about Ethiopian Jews *in Israel* and encapsulates the transition that has occurred and is occurring within the community.

4. Geographically, spirits and practices identified as *zar* have been documented throughout eastern North Africa and areas of the Middle East, including Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, Tunisia, Kuwait, and now Israel. The appearance of documented references to *zar* in Ethiopia in the early to mid nineteenth century suggests that *zar* has existed in Ethiopia since at least the eighteenth century (and perhaps as early as the fifteenth century, and spread to other areas via slave trading, Islamic pilgrimages, and other migrations).
5. See Corinaldi 1998 for details of the historical development of Jewish and Israeli law concerning Ethiopian Jews.
6. A pseudonym.

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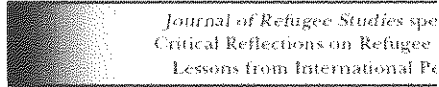
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Journal of Refugee Studies

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Journal of Refugee Studies (2002) 15 (2): 153-170. doi: 10.1093/jrs/15.2.153

Lost Tribes and Coffee Ceremonies: Zar Spirit Possession and the Ethno-Religious Identity of Ethiopian Jews in Israel

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Abstract

The immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel has been steeped in debates over religious authenticity and identity. Throughout the immigration and assimilation process, and even prior to immigration, in Ethiopia, zar spirit beliefs and practices have been a fulcrum for contests over the ethno-religious identity of Ethiopian Jews. This paper explores the intersection between zar and Judaism in Israel, debates over theology and observance, and the ramifications for the development of Ethiopian Jewish identity, integration, and religious practice.

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