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## PREFACE

This book on the most extensive transnational, 'traditional' healing cult in Africa and the Middle East, concerned primarily with women's problems, is based on an International African Seminar held at the University of Khartoum, Sudan Republic, in January 1988. The seminar was organised jointly by the Institute of African and Asian Studies and the Traditional Medicine Research Institute, Khartoum and the International African Institute, London, with generous support from the Ford Foundation and the Swedish Agency for Research Co-operation with Developing Countries (SAREC). We are particularly grateful to the hospitality of the University of Khartoum and to the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Yusuf Fadl Hassan. We also wish to thank the then Minister of Social Affairs of the Sudan Government for opening our conference. There was, indeed, gratifyingly wide public interest in our seminar, which was attended by prominent healers as well as by feminists and, at the other end of the spectrum, Muslim fundamentalists. We benefited greatly from their contributions to our discussions as from others who presented papers which we have, unfortunately, not been able to include in the present volume.

These different views, as well as that of modern medical opinion, are reflected in the chapters which follow. These explore the origins and diffusion of the cult, its largely psychodramatic therapeutic techniques, its relations with orthodox religion (Islam or Christianity) and its socio-cultural and psycho-social significance and meaning in different places and periods. The cult's persistence and adaptability to changing socio-economic conditions in countries as widely separated as Egypt and Kuwait is remarkable. This continuing viability and popularity, particularly with certain social categories of women (and some categories of men) is, in part, due to the paucity of modern medical facilities. But, as in contemporary Europe, it also reflects the limitations of organic medicine and the demand for spiritual forms of 'alternative medicine' which address perennial psycho-social problems in culturally meaningful terms. While of great intrinsic

interest as an African medico-religious phenomenon, the *zar-bori* cult is thus also of wider general interest to all those who are concerned with the causes and treatment of psycho-social stress rooted in women's domestic roles.

Our study ranges widely geographically, although it does not, unfortunately, include first-hand data on all the countries where *zar-bori* is reported to currently play a significant role. We lack, for instance, detailed information on Saudi Arabia (where, of course, official attitudes are very disapproving), and a number of other Middle Eastern countries where we hope our work may encourage future enquiries – however difficult. In the meantime, within the limits of our existing knowledge, we have tried to make this study as comprehensive as possible and, to that end, we include an annotated select bibliography, prepared by G.P. Makris and Richard Natvig. The introductory chapter benefits from helpful comments from a number of colleagues, notably Pamela Constantinides, Murray Last, Richard Natvig, Olivier de Sardan and Joseph Tubiana. In preparing the manuscript for publication we are especially grateful to Jackie Hunt at the I.A.I., and to Jean Canfield and Jenny Ivey in the Anthropology Department at the London School of Economics through whose speeding word processors most of these pages have passed.

I. M. Lewis  
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**Introduction** I. M. Lewis

## **ZAR IN CONTEXT: THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF AN AFRICAN HEALING CULT**

### I

In most parts of the world, illness and its treatment tend to evoke, at some level at least, a spiritual or mystical aspect. This is particularly clear in Africa where witchcraft and sorcery are regularly invoked to explain sickness and other misfortunes, and, especially in the case of women patients, a wide range of symptoms are commonly ascribed to spirit possession. When this last diagnosis is made, treatment essentially follows one of two opposed techniques. The major powers of the cosmos may be invoked to exorcise the pathogenic spirits involved; or, on the contrary, efforts may be made to placate and tame them by paying them cult. In this latter case, possession becomes an integral part of the process of initiation into a healing cult which is based on the experience and transcendence of affliction (celebrated, rather than cast out: cf. Lewis, 1989). Recruitment to such predominantly women's healing cults is thus achieved through the endurance and conquest of affliction and illness which, retrospectively, acquires a positive value. Even the initial pain and distress, inflicted by the spirits, can also be viewed positively independently of the cult to which it leads. For it is thus that the spirits prompt their victims to make what are seen as advantageous demands on other members of their community (cf. Morsy, p. 196).

While various organic syndromes, either in themselves or associated with other disorders, are by no means excluded, these therapeutic cults are primarily concerned with the spiritual, moral or psychological dimensions of disorders associated with role conflict and their treatment. Typically, and most generally, such 'cults of affliction' (to borrow Turner's useful term) address psychosocial stress reactions affecting female identity and relations with the opposite sex in a wide range of contexts, and are, thus, highly dynamic, changing in their epidemiology as sources of such stress change. To a significant extent, therefore, the incidence of affliction treated in this way, and the degree of involvement in the corresponding cults of affliction, serve as indices of tension and conflict, and hence may be regarded as rough and

ready 'strain gauges' in much the same way that witchcraft accusations have been treated by anthropologists where witchcraft is prevalent (cf. Marwick, 1964). There are, of course, important differences in the consequences of ascribing illness symptoms to spirit possession rather than to witchcraft. In the latter case, blame is pinned on another human being inside or outside the family (the accused witch); in the former, a spirit is held responsible. As I have argued elsewhere (Lewis, 1986, pp. 51ff), witchcraft accusations seem usually to be levelled against equals or inferiors, whereas spirit possession is typically diagnosed in inferiors in such a way that their therapeutic treatment affects superiors. Thus, responsibility for providing treatment for a spirit-afflicted wife falls on the husband. Hence, particularly in a context of domestic conflict (involving husband and wife, or wives), the sick role has its compensations and strategic value, and can even be materially productive, not least when, through the demands of the spirits, the patient seeks relief in the regular performance of costly, placatory rituals. Whatever the conscious motivations of those concerned, episodes of spirit illness and their treatment thus constitute an important weapon in the armoury with which women (and sometimes also men of inferior status) exert leverage on their male superiors. From another point of view, in their diagnostic procedures and cathartic and other treatments, therapeutic cults of this type also constitute indigenous psychotherapies or even psychiatries as was long ago recognised by the late Professor Tijani al-Mahi, founding Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Khartoum who, more than anyone else, is the inspiration for the present volume.

Calling upon the resources of history, social anthropology and psychiatry, our joint object here is to explore the contemporary significance and social history of what is historically and contemporaneously the largest and most widely distributed indigenous spirit healing cult in Africa: the *zar-bori* cult as it is known in the Sudan Republic (where, as the composition of this book reflects, it has been most thoroughly studied). As we shall show, this cult, or complex of cults, has its roots in Islamic West Africa (principally Nigeria and Niger), source of the *bori* component, and in Ethiopia, with its mixed Christian and Islamic heritage, source of *zar*. In the Sudan, both these currents flow together forming, in the presence of the local *tumbura* and other local cults, the hybrid *zar-bori* which has in turn spread to north Africa and the Middle East. It has also influenced many other contemporary possession cults in East (see Giles, 1987) and West Africa (see de Sardan, 1984), but these far-flung connections are beyond the scope of the present study.

While the cult conserves pre-Islamic and pre-Christian features, its symbolism and ritual are highly syncretic and strongly influenced by both these 'world religions' – which, in turn, it has itself influenced. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the impact of the cult in Islamic North Africa and the Middle East, including the cradle of Islam, Saudi Arabia and the

Gulf States. Its diffusion over this vast area owes much to the slave trade, especially in the nineteenth century, and to the incessant flux and mingling of peoples and cultures associated over the centuries with pilgrimage to Mecca. However, to establish the existence of currents of cultural diffusion and population movement may demonstrate the availability of cultural innovations and change, but does not explain which particular innovations are taken up, and how and why they are adopted (cf. Morsy, p. 194). Thus, if we are to seek a fuller understanding of the history of this religious movement (to use a term that would obviously be strongly rejected by Christians and Muslims in the countries we are concerned with), we must try to investigate the contexts in which *zar-bori* not only developed, but was also taken up and redeveloped. The contemporary social contexts in which we find the cult, and its meaning today, may also provide some clues to understanding its past history. But, of course, we must guard against a-historical projections, especially since we are concerned with a phenomenon which, though essentially focused on women's problems, evidently owes its remarkable powers of survival to its capacity to express different sources of stress in different contexts.

## II

We begin, then, by reviewing what we know of the cult's current significance in relation to the incidence and expression of psychosocial tension. Although we lack comprehensive modern sociological (or psychiatric) studies, it is clear from the existing sources (e.g. Leiris 1958; Young 1975; Messing 1958; Morton 1977; Lewis, H.S. 1983; and Tubiana, p. 27) that possession by *zar* spirits is commonly diagnosed among traditional Christian Amhara peasant women where symptoms of illness occur in contexts of domestic strife. The affliction (and the spirit responsible) is known as *kuweynya* – from a verb meaning to 'bind tightly' or 'shackle' a prisoner (here the *zar* victim), so that escape is impossible. As in the case discussed below by Tubiana (p. 19ff.), husbands and other male relatives tend to prefer diagnosis in terms of a spirit which can be definitively exorcised by a Christian priest but, if this proves ineffective, may be forced to accept treatment by a female *zar* cult shaman. This is likely to be a long, drawn out, as well as costly, affair, since the *zar* spirits are very demanding, and may involve frequent relapses, associated with subsequent episodes of domestic difficulties or role conflict. Chronic illness, requiring sustained treatment, may lead to full initiation into the *zar* cult, the patient becoming a 'bride' of the spirits (with whom she is assumed to have sexual relations). The implicitly rebellious, feminist tone of Ethiopian *zar* is, perhaps, most clearly evident in towns where a high proportion of marginalised single women, living autonomously as beer sellers and prostitutes, are heavily involved in *zar* coteries on which they depend for sociability and support in time of need.

For the Muslim northern Sudan, where *zar* is more unambiguously an urban and peri-urban phenomenon, we possess much fuller recent sociological and psychiatric documentation (Kennedy, 1967; Constantinides, 1972, 1977, 1978, 1985 and p. 83; al-Shahi, 1984; Boddy, 1988; Sayyid Hurreiz, p. 147; Kenyon, p. 100; Rahim p. 137; Makris and al-Safi p. 118). A *zar* spirit here is also commonly known as *dastur*, 'peg', 'constitution' or 'permission', as well as 'thread' (*khayt*) and, very frequently, 'red wind' (*rih al-ahmar*). Perhaps to a greater extent than in Ethiopia, *zar* has become an integral part of Muslim Sudanese women's culture, to such an extent indeed that Constantinides (1985, p. 691) sees *zar* rituals, like other Sudanese women's life cycle rituals, as a symbolic reaffirmation of the fundamental social importance of women 'as those who menstruate and those who reproduce'. Boddy (1988, p. 6) even appears to see 'susceptibility to [*zar*] possession' as rooted in the local practice of pharaonic circumcision.

According to Constantinides (1985, p. 688) (urban) Sudanese women tend to adopt the *zar* sick role when they fail to live up to an expected female role; do not find a suitable spouse, have unsatisfactory marriages, or fail to produce children; or are married with children, yet find life unsatisfactory. As in Ethiopia, religious exorcism is also available as a treatment option, so that, more generally, *zar* is often the final diagnosis for a difficult illness which both medical doctors and Muslim healers (*fakis*) have failed to cure (see Ismail Abdalla, p. 44). Constantinides also found that cult groups were mainly drawn from middle income settled riverine families and often included women whose husbands were migrants. (Cult leaders tended to be of southern Sudanese origin.) This bourgeois nexus was reinforced by the fact that the greater seclusion and confinement of town women, linked with rapid urbanisation, often triggered a woman's involvement in urban *zar*, membership of a *zar* group being one of the few ways in which such women could gain access to a wider world outside their houses. Hence if *zar* armed such women against the constraints imposed by their husbands (and other relatives), it also facilitated their adaptation to the urban milieu.

The extent of psychosocial pressures currently affecting women is further documented in the health survey finding, reported by Rahim (p. 137), that over 40% in a random sample in Khartoum were diagnosed as having mental health problems of which 17% were judged to require therapy. A similar proportion of women psychiatric out-patients at Khartoum North Nervous Diseases Clinic reported that they had tried *zar*, and that this had proved particularly effective in what Professor Rahim diagnoses as hysterical reactions and anxiety states: most of these patients recorded that they believed in *zar*. In her anthropological study of a riverine village north of Khartoum, Boddy (1988) found that almost half the married women in the village succumbed to *zar* which was most prevalent in the 35-55 age group;

a woman 'once possessed' was 'always possessed thereafter' (cf. also al-Shahi, 1984). Centrally concerned with fertility problems and other conjugal issues, the experience of possession trance in effect constitutes, Boddy (1988, p. 23) argues, a comprehensive psychotherapy affording women new insights into recurrent problems, 'unchaining thought from the fetters of hegemonic cultural constructs...' opening it up in different and possibly illuminating directions'. Although here essentially following previous writers on *zar*, Boddy goes further to assert, rather than demonstrate, the far-reaching (and sometimes radical) psychic learning experiences she attributes to participation in *zar* ritual. This interpretation of *zar* experience as a transformative therapy, effecting cures based on a restructuring of the self, seems to be at odds with the acknowledged chronicity of *zar*, a feature which, from a psychiatric point of view, Rahim sees as due to the essentially 'palliative approach of managing an escape from facing reality by assuming another, although popular, unreality as a substitute'. Without necessarily endorsing Professor Rahim's concepts of 'unreality', Boddy's interpretation also seems to underestimate how a 'cure' may require a dramatic and permanent change of role, from housewife to *zar* initiate and eventually *zar* group leader.

This brings us to what modern Sudanese feminists are apt to see as the ultimate cause of *zar*: conservative male-constituted society. Especially because it is so expensive and encourages 'superstition' and rebellious female sentiments, *zar* may thus be readily branded by male-dominated officialdom as a 'harmful custom'. But for many women it remains an available and viable means of coping with life within the existing social parameters of a highly 'traditional' Muslim society (cf. al-Shahi, 1984, p. 39). One way in which *zar* groups are today seeking to escape such criticism and achieve wider social recognition and acceptance is, as Hurreiz shows (p. 147), by emphasising the (psycho) dramatic aspects of *zar* ritual within the context of Sudanese folk drama. Here, particularly it would seem in middle class contexts, *zar* cults are indeed becoming (officially registered) clubs, and *zar* is being folklorised, a process which is paralleled with *bori* in Nigeria (King, 1966; Last, p. 49), and has gone even further in Egypt with the creation of a distinctive 'Oriental' ballet style, purportedly based on *zar* (see the esoteric ballet journal, *Arabesque*, 1978, 1983, etc.)

In the generally much more deeply westernised setting of Egypt, *zar*, which, as we shall see, was rampant a century ago, is reported to be now largely confined to rural contexts and to the impoverished sections of Cairo (Kriss and Kriss-Heinrich, 1960/62; Fakhouri, 1968; Nelson, 1971; Morsy, 1978; Natvig, 1988). The therapeutic cult, in which the patient is again the 'bride' or 'horse' of the spirits, has all the principal features seen earlier in Ethiopia and the Sudan. In Nile delta villages (Saunders, 1977), *zar* involvement is linked to embourgeoisement and to male respectability and

female seclusion (as in the Sudan, and in Somalia – see Luling, p. 167). In such village contexts, as Morsy (p. 200) points out, possession afflictions, here known revealingly as ‘excuses’, serve as an index of relative powerlessness. In this context, the possessed human victim is envisaged as being ‘worn’, like a suit of clothes, by the spirit. A case in the classic tradition concerns a woman, forced to marry a much older husband, who was diagnosed as possessed when, failing to become pregnant, she became ill. Once she succeeded in giving birth she recovered. The spectrum of role conflict here, leading to possession illness, explored by Morsy is quite wide: it includes barren women, subservient daughters-in-law, cloistered women, and, a recent development, mothers-in-law with independent migrant sons and wives. Although to a much lesser extent, men in positions of powerlessness – are also vulnerable. So, unsuccessful male migrants and other men who prove incapable of sustaining the expected male bread-winning role may succumb. However, the main focus of *zar* remains the situation of women in a male-dominated order, with the affliction and its treatment serving ultimately, as has been argued in the Sudan, to contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of male authority.

In extensively modernised and oil-rich Kuwait, we find a rather different pattern of *zar* involvement. As Ashkanani shows (p. 222), the primary targets of *zar* afflictions today are middle-class, middle-aged women suffering from what amounts to ‘future shock’. They are certainly not short of material possessions, but find themselves alienated from their westernised, literate bourgeois husbands and children, and at the same time uprooted from their familiar ‘traditional’ world. They seek nostalgically to recreate the comforting security of this lost world in *zar* rituals which recall and restore their familiar sense of identity. Aristocratic women tend to be better educated, and, with a wider experience of different cultures, less upset by modernisation. At the other end of the scale, lower class husbands adhere more closely to traditional role expectations and their women folk are correspondingly less subject to domestic stress of this kind and, like aristocrats, correspondingly less involved in the *zar* cult which, however, also includes people of ex-slave origin. Indeed, the cult priestesses (*mamas*) are mainly ex-slaves (as in the Sudan). Thus, middle-class *zar* devotees who frequent these *zar* ‘day centres’ may actually be enjoying the company of former servants who have now become their leaders. It is at this point that Ashkanani’s data connect with what we already know from other sources of the involvement in *zar* of low status (ex-slave) African Muslim migrant workers in the Gulf States generally, as for instance in Iran (Marsden, 1972). We urgently require detailed research like Ashkanani’s into the role today of *zar* in the domestic life of the local Arab populations of the other Gulf States.

Turning now to Nigeria and Niger (Abdalla, Echard and Last), we come to a situation that (with the partial exception of Ethiopia) is different from

those we have previously discussed. Here, again in a Muslim context, conversion to this world religion is still taking place among the Hausa-speaking peoples; and, the secluded wives of Muslim men are apt to become involved with the *bori* cult which is, in part at least, the men’s discarded pre-Islamic religion. Within Hausa Islam, as a treatment for a wide spectrum of illnesses, in competition with treatment by an Islamic healer (a *malam*), *bori* continues to prove attractive to secluded urban wives and those of bourgeois Muslim farmers. As in Ethiopia, divorced single women and prostitutes in towns tend to associate in shamanic *bori* groups. While strongly disapproved of by the Muslim religious establishment, *bori* activity can, conveniently, be excused as mere ‘play’ or entertainment (King, 1966; Last, p. 49), a categorisation in harmony with what Last calls its ‘trivialisation’ through television presentations as folklore. Clearly *bori* features at different levels and in different social contexts, with correspondingly different meanings and significance. Its secularisation in some westernised contexts provides obvious parallels to the Sudanese trend from cult to club. At the same time, Last reports (p. 55) how *bori* also continues as a serious therapy, particularly for women with fertility and other life crisis problems, arguing that the psychological effectiveness of treatment depends on the patient learning how to handle trance experiences which enable her to master problems in her daily life. This, it is argued, forces ‘self-awareness on patients whose existing self has been trapped by unquestioned yet resented social ties’ (cf. Nelson, 1971; Constantinides, 1985; Boddy, 1988). Here again, this can very appropriately be seen as constituting an indigenous psychotherapy.

While as with *zar* in the Sudan and Egypt, the cult itself is dynamic, readily accommodating new spirits, representing new situations and experiences, the therapy it offers seems essentially conservative: enabling women to adjust to and accept pressures in ways which do not radically challenge the existing, male-dominated order. In addition to the pattern already described, Nicole Echard (p. 71) however detects a more radical role for *bori* in Niger where the cult is currently expanding in reaction to Islamicisation. Not only do new *bori* spirits represent and articulate new problems – drought and political oppression, for example – but the cult itself has figured, so she argues, in the mobilisation of peasant resistance to colonial conquest and subsequent post-independence ethnic oppression. Here, calling upon its wider inter-village cult ties, *bori* transcends the domestic female domain and is ‘masculinised’ to provide a vehicle for social protest against the rulers of the state.

Finally we return to North Africa, in this case Tunisia, where the main African possession cult was known as *bori* rather than *zar*, testifying to its West African origins (Ferchiou, p. 209). Here, today, the original term *bori* has virtually disappeared, and its spirit possession tradition has been integrated in the syncretic Muslim cults of saints. As Sophie Ferchiou sees it, there are three principal modalities. Closest to the *zar-bori* cult of other

regions is Stambali, the cult of the African ex-slave saint Sidi Saad, patronised by people of Black African origin and presided over by a priestess and with an entirely female following. Less marginal in Islamic terms are such again predominantly women's cults as those of Sufi saints like Saida el-Manoubiya, which attracts crowds of women. Devotees group themselves at the sanctuaries according to their *tariqa* affiliation and, to the accompaniment of stimulating music, go into trance. They are believed to be possessed by lustful male spirits from whose sway they are exorcised in the course of the rites. Lastly, in the cult of more 'orthodox' saints, both men and women participate in segregated congregations at the shrines, the men achieving *collective* trance, interpreted as union with God, while women are *individually* possessed by spirits (*jinn*) which are exorcised by the guardian of the sanctuary. Here there is gender-polarised ritual parallelism. Under the same roof, but in separate compartments, the men are possessed by God, the women by evil spirits: the latter are engaged in therapy, the former in worship.

Thus here, while encompassing a *zar-bori* type, women's therapeutic possession cult associated with ex-slaves, possession afflictions are also treated by exorcism within popular Sufi saints' cults, either separately or alongside men's mystical practices. This is quite common elsewhere in the Maghrib today (cf. Mernissi, 1977). Women are led to seek relief from disorders, attributed to possession, through activating the spirits by means of ritual trance and placation in the course of the rites conducted at these saints' shrines. In the extremely westernised context of Tunisia, famous for President Bourghiba's promotion of women's rights and education, most of the afflicted women belong to the poorer sections of the population. They include the wives of low paid functionaries, usually migrants and of urban artisans whose standard of living has declined since independence. These are frequently married women, working in poorly paid jobs, and typically faced with conflicts between their traditional domestic obligations and their new working role. These working mothers, as Ferchiou puts it, are made to feel guilty 'twice over' and readily succumb to afflictions diagnosed in terms of spirit possession, especially when they have fertility problems (for interesting comparative material on possession in contemporary Algeria, see Ouitis, 1984).

This Tunisian and similar North African material (see Dermenghem, 1954) raises an important theoretical point. As we saw at the outset, the *zar-bori* cult complex corresponds to the model of 'cult of affliction' where, ultimately, relief is achieved by overcoming the source of affliction by domesticating it (in effect, learning to 'live with it') rather than by definitively casting it out. In de Heusch's (1962) terminology, the first process amounts to adorcism (paying cult to the spirit), the second to exorcism. In Tunisia, as elsewhere in Islamic North Africa generally, however, female possession

typically becomes inscribed as 'exorcism' (rather than adorcism) within the cult of Muslim saints. Yet such 'exorcisms' are essentially problematic, since patients repeatedly return to the saint's sanctuary to experience possession – trance and 'exorcism' – sometimes on a regular, weekly basis (cf. Crapanzano, 1973, pp. 137 ff. on the ambiguities of a typical Moroccan saint's cult; and Natvig, p. 184). Obviously, although represented as exorcism, we have here a routinised cult practise which, while ideologically contrasted with that of adorcist *zar-bori*, has similar cultic significance. We thus see, as has been pointed out elsewhere (e.g. by Davis, 1980; Lewis, 1990) that the regular practice of exorcism may, paradoxically, develop into a cult, thus enabling cults to exist clandestinely within the folds of the protective mantle which, theoretically, should guarantee their exclusion. This possibility seems all the more important where straightforward cults of affliction, based on adorcism, are curtailed or completely excluded by a male-dominated religious establishment. Does this situation then signify an entrenchment, or dilution of patriarchal male power? Or should it be viewed simply as an alternative way of reacting to the same conditions of male dominance?

What should we conclude from this extensive review of *zar-bori* spirit possession as an expression and index of role conflict in the lives of women? The classic context is clearly domestic life where, as explanations of a variety of disorders, possession episodes are linked to problems concerning life crises, and especially, infertility. However, our synchronic treatment of this comparative data indicates that, in different cultural and socioeconomic contexts, different classes of women are most at risk. In Ethiopia, while marginal townswomen find general social security in *zar*, in 'traditional' rural circles *zar* affliction seems to be particularly likely to affect the wives of men who abuse their traditional authority over women. Whether it is also attractive to non-Amhara women who marry Christian Amharas, or to the wives of men who become Amharised Christians, is a question for future research.

In 'traditional' Muslim contexts such as in the Sudan, Nigeria and Niger, Islamic respectability and the associated seclusion of women increase the chances of possession, linking it with embourgeoisement. In Tunisia, strongly affected by Western 'modernising' influence, possession also seems to thrive in petty bourgeois society – being implicated in conflict between traditional and modern values and aspirations. In Egypt, in urban settings, possession is reported to thrive in more impoverished circumstances although in rural settings its pattern seems similar to that in the Sudan and Tunisia. In the Egyptian countryside, peasant cultivators are notably less likely to become chronic victims of possession than the wives of more secluded, better-off, bourgeois merchants and the like. In Kuwait, perhaps the most striking case of all, those most at risk are alienated middle-class women, lacking the experience and education to participate in the lives of



their husbands and children and, in other ways also, trapped in their luxurious new houses where they do not feel at home.

Thus, cutting across class and material resources, the common factor linked with possession seems to be the experience of identity-threatening stress, exacerbated by conditions of confinement and exclusion. In a male-ordered world, women are especially subject to these conditions, and the preferential connection between these marginal (and often alien) spirits and women is culturally highly elaborated in a variety of ways which make the spirits' association with women, as the vulnerable 'second sex', seem 'natural'. In Ethiopian Christianity and North African Islam this is the general ideological setting, within which, particular sociological pressures and individual experiences lead to the patterns of possession we have discussed

### III

With this synchronic picture in mind, we now move to a diachronic perspective, taking advantage of the unique, if far from complete, store of historical information on the *zar-bori* complex which does not simply exist as a tantalising given in the ethnographic present but has a history, indeed a complex one. First, however, let us briefly recapitulate on the distribution of the cult. In West Africa, from which it has spread across the Sahara to North Africa, *bori* exists as a separate cult. Similarly, *zar* is an independent cult in Ethiopia, whence it has diffused into the Sudan (where it blends with *bori*, brought by West African pilgrimage and migration), Somalia and Egypt. Interestingly, both *bori* and *zar* have identical myths of origin. These go back to the beginning of creation. According to Ethiopian sources, having given birth to thirty children, Eve feared God's envy and when God requested to see them she hid the fifteen most beautiful ones. As a punishment, God decreed that those who had been hidden would remain hidden, becoming *zars* who would henceforth control their visible human siblings (Leiris, 1958, p.13). The same account of the cosmic origin of *zars* (here known as *sar habashi*\* or *mingis* – from Amharic 'government') is given in Somalia in a Muslim context – but not, so far as I know, in the Islamic Sudan. Similarly, Muslims in Niger relate that the *bori* spirits are the descendants of those children whom Adam and Eve hid from their creator (Echard, p. 66).

Moving from myth to history, we know more about the origins of *bori* than about those of *zar*. Echard (p. 65) convincingly argues that the *bori* cult, with its elaborate spirit hierarchy (recorded in detail by Tremearne in 1914 in West and North Africa) cannot plausibly be regarded as a late nineteenth century product. Rather its roots lie in the pre-Islamic culture of the Hausa and their neighbours, either in the *asna* ancestor cult, or perhaps as Echard proposes in that of specialist hunting groups whose ethnozoological and botanical lore parallels the medical expertise of *bori* priests and priestesses.

\*Literally 'Ethiopian' *sar*.

More generally, with its opposition to human images, the advent of Islam discouraged traditional west African masquerading culture which, in turn, Last suggests, may have encouraged the development of *bori* as a possession cult that dispensed with masques in its rites. The post-Islamic form of *bori*, as Ismail Abdalla points out, bears the firm imprint of the 1804 *jihād* of Osman dan Fodio, with the *bori* spirit pantheon presided over by a powerful Muslim spirit, the king (*sarkin*), in the image of the mortal leader of the Islamic community. With the adoption of the male-dominated Muslim religion, the *bori* cult was marginalised, and became especially attractive to wives whose status had deteriorated under their husband's new faith. Indeed, as Last (1979a) among others has recorded, in the contemporary context of conversion of animist Hausa men to Islam, their wives tend simultaneously to join the *bori* cult. This close parallelism between Islam as the men's faith, and *bori* as their wives' respite is also reflected in the delicate division of labour between Muslim spirit exorcist (*malam*) and *bori* priestess (see Abdalla).

*Bori* thus enters history as a syncretic product, based in the religion of the pre-Islamic Hausa and related peoples displaced by Islam and converted into a women's healing cult (for analogous formative processes for possession cults elsewhere, see Lewis, 1989). It may well have spread to North Africa (and even the Sudan) with commerce and the slave trade as early as the fifteenth century (Ferchiou, p. 209). In the Sudan, it owes its great influence to the pilgrimage traffic from West Africa through the Sudan and the settlement, over centuries, of Hausa and other West Africans there (al-Nagar, 1972). The historical origins of *zar* in Ethiopia are more problematic. According to Cerulli's classic linguistic hypothesis, the word *zar* itself is traced to a pre-Christian origin as one of the names for God in Cushitic religion. Apart from references in undated Ethiopian manuscripts in a tradition presumed to go back to medieval times, as Tubiana points out (p. 19), the first secure modern references appear to occur in the early nineteenth century. That *zar* seems to have been well established and spreading in the adjacent Sudan in the 1820s in the wake of Turco-Egyptian Colonisation (Constantinides, p. 86), and very shortly after that in Egypt (Natvig, p. 179) would suggest that it was indeed already deeply rooted in Ethiopia in the eighteenth century (cf. Natvig, 1987). In the Ethiopian context we do not possess, so far as I know, any unequivocal evidence to suggest that the *zar* cult originated, developed and flourished (as did *bori*) dialectically with the spread of Christianity or Islam. This, however, cannot be entirely excluded since Ethiopia is, historically, a 'melting pot' state in which there are strong pressures for the acculturation of people of diverse ethnic origin in the mould of the politically dominant Christian Amhara (cf. Lewis, 1983a). Since *zar* in Ethiopia, as elsewhere, is primarily a women's affair, intimately connected with the position of women, on this view it would

also be necessary to document an associated deterioration in the status of such Amharised women, rendering them particularly prone to *zar* spirit possession; or else propose some other source of new stress affecting women. So far as I am aware, we do not have such information at present. We do know, however, that the *zar* spirit galaxy, as is to be expected, reflects the Ethiopian ethnic mosaic and the dynamic interaction of the two locally dominant world religions – Christianity and Islam. The impact of the Christian heritage is seen in the class of *zar* spirits known as the right-hand house, associated with Jerusalem, and the transformation of various emperors and Christian saints into *zar* spirits. Islamic influence is evident in the conversion of many saints into *zar* spirits and in the frequent use of the term ‘master of saints’ (*bala awliya*) for *zar* shaman or priestess. The ritual use of coffee and the stimulant *qat* also indicate Muslim influence (see Tubiana, p. 31). In addition to contributing spirits, perhaps as Tubiana and Natvig suggest in the formative phase, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, the Cushitic-speaking Oromo, are also the source of the term *wadaja*, generally used to denote a *zar* seance (cf. Knutson, 1967, p. 153). Finally, we seem to catch a reflected glimpse of the early nineteenth century power struggle of the ‘era of the princes’ and the fierce wars between Emperor Theodore (1855–68) and his rivals, in the highly militaristic tone of the *zar* spirits and terminology in the earliest full descriptions we have (see Leiris, 1981, p. 24).

Although we do not know definitely how old it is, on current evidence *zar* thus appears in the historical record in early nineteenth century Ethiopia as a fully fledged syncretic cult, an integral part of popular Christian Ethiopian culture, associated with women and women’s problems, at precisely the time when it is recorded as spreading to the Sudan and Egypt (and probably also Somalia, via the ancient Muslim city of Harar), countries linked politically and economically for centuries by trade, religion and war. The head of the Ethiopian church, it should also be remembered, was, until late this century, appointed by the Coptic Patriarch in Egypt, and the export of slaves from Ethiopia (and the Sudan) – especially those of Cushitic stock – had been going on from the earliest Islamic times. More immediately, the Egyptian conquest of the Sudan in 1821 under Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha, led to a revival of trade and pilgrimage, the invasion of new foreign influences, and paved the way for the ensuing Sudanese Mahdist war in which the Christian Emperor Johannes perished in 1889.

Outside Ethiopia, *zar* as we know it today in the Sudan appears to have assumed its characteristic features in the Turco-Egyptian period (1820–99). As Constantinides forcefully argues (p. 97), all the flamboyant, cosmopolitan and often exotic features of commerce and social and political life in this period are faithfully reproduced in the pantheon of *zar* spirits (which includes a spiritualised form of General Gordon) and even their costumes

preserved as the spirits’ wardrobe. In this historical context, the *zar* spirits which are known generically as ‘winds’ (and also ‘threads’ or ‘pegs’) were literally winds of change: retrospectively, although it receives new spirit accretions from time to time, the spirit galaxy constitutes a sort of spiritual memory lane, preserving in perpetuity the experience of this intense and diverse time of change and innovation in the history of the Sudan. Oral historical material on the origins of cult groups and their leaders, collected by Constantinides and Kenyon, goes back to the same period and thus confirms its importance in the local genesis of *zar*.

Imported from Ethiopia, and naturalised in the Sudan as *zar-bori*, *zar* was also influenced in its development here by the indigenous *tumbura* cult first reported by Brenda Seligman in 1909 in a context involving Islamised Zande and other southern Sudanese. New light on, and further evidence of, this Zande connection is provided by Makris and al-Safi’s pioneering research (p. 118). *Tumbura* seems in origin to be a syncretic cult, based on marginalised Zande ancestor spirits, associated with the spread of Islamic influence in the southern Sudan and, like the Borana–Sheikh Husseyn cult in northern Kenya and southern Somalia (Hjort, 1979; Luling, p. 171) to possess Sufi *tariqa*-like features. Thus, its banner displayed at seances celebrates ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (founder of the Qadiriya order) and Sayyid Bilal; sacrifice is called *karama*; and members regularly visit saints’ shrines in the neighbourhood of each *tumbura* centre. If *tumbura* consequently represents a kind of Islamicisation of traditional pre-Islamic (ancestor) cults among the Zande (marginalised in the northern Islamic setting), *zar* itself has for long been spreading among southern Sudanese women as an (unofficial) agent of Islamisation in the fashion described below (p. 156) by Sellers. Other local formative influences on Sudanese *zar* derive from Funj and Nuba sources (see Kenyon, p. 103).

We have already referred to Islamic influences on the *zar* cult in Christian Ethiopia – which, as Tubiana hints, may have been implicated in its creation. These were further consolidated in the Sudan and in Egypt where the period of greatest elaboration of *zar* coincided with the rise and spread of the Islamic religious orders (*tariqas*) as the dominant expression of popular Islam. Their influence is evident in the fact that their saintly leaders constitute the first of the seven general categories of spirits in the *zar* pantheon, in the hymns sung at the beginning and end of *zar* seances, and in the use of the term *shaiikha* (female *shaiikh*) in place of the Christian Ethiopian term *alaga* for cult leader. It can also be seen in the use of the word *hadra*, borrowed from Sufi ritual, to describe a *zar* seance and in the holding of *zar* ceremonies at, or in association with visits to, the tombs of Sufi saints – powerful sources of mystical blessings. As Natvig (p. 185) points out, the currency of this practice of mingling *zar* and saints in early twentieth century Egypt is indicated by an official edict of 1905, prohibiting the holding of *zar* seances at Sufi shrines.

This practice continues to this day in Tunisia, as Ferchiou notes (p. 210) and elsewhere in the Maghrib – despite the interruption of several years imposed by Bourghiba's modernising Neo-Destour party which converted shrines into Neo-Destour party centres, or meeting places for local women's groups – a transformation, literally, from *dastur* (= *zar* or *bori*) to Neo-Destour! All this, as Natvig shrewdly notes, goes far to explain the popular etymology of the word *zar* among Arabic speakers who tend to derive it from the Sufi term *ziyara* – paying a visit (in search of blessing) to a saint's tomb. Elaborated in this way in the Sudan during the Turco-Egyptian period (1820–96), *zar-bori* was carried by slaves and pilgrims from the Sudan (and also from West Africa and Ethiopia) to the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf. Slaves and servants from the same places brought the cult to Egypt at the same time where contemporary sources describe *zar* as spreading like an epidemic. The distinguished Dutch Arabist Hurgronje's vivid record of his year's sojourn in Mecca in 1884/5 provides an unusually well-documented account of the crucial, if paradoxical, role of the pilgrimage in the diffusion and rediffusion of the *zar* cult which, therefore not entirely unhistorically, some Sudanese trace to Arabian origins. The fact that during and after the Turkish period Egyptian-recruited Sudanese slaves and military personnel frequently returned to visit or settle in the Sudan also explains how it is that Egypt is sometimes identified in the Sudan as a source of *zar* (cf. Constantinides, p. 96). Indeed, as Constantinides suggests in relation to southern Sudanese, and Natvig to Ethiopian, slaves imported into Egypt, immigrants from both countries may, as uprooted aliens, have further developed the cult during their sojourn there.

During the fundamentalist Mahdiya in the Sudan (1881–98), *zar* was, naturally, suppressed but re-emerged with further elaboration in the succeeding Anglo-Egyptian period. Although new spirits and new interpretations of old spirits have subsequently been added (see Kenyon, p. 109), the Sudanese *zar-bori* pantheon seems to have remained remarkably stable since then.

In Egypt, where the *zar* cult was spreading from urban centres at least as early as 1850, both Natvig and Morsy argue that European economic intrusion by this time had undermined the old medieval economic order which was replaced by petty commodity production, with a corresponding decline in the position of peasants and the lower classes generally and a significant deterioration in the position of women. As has often been pointed out, reacting to European intrusion, the Sufi religious orders experienced a renaissance and proved particularly attractive to these disadvantaged classes. While women were not excluded from the Sufi brotherhoods, they were segregated in their rituals and, as we have seen, eventually officially prohibited from holding *zar* ceremonies at saints' shrines. This explanation, however, can hardly account for the great popularity of *zar* in the harems of

the rich upper classes which the literature of the period so abundantly documents. Given that those who brought *zar* into these comfortable quarters were often Ethiopian or Sudanese servants or slaves, their appeal for their Egyptian mistresses – other than merely that of fashion – may perhaps be associated with the increased seclusion of women at a time of Islamic intensification.

If these constitute plausible accounts of the receptivity of Egyptian women a century ago to the spread of the *zar* cult which, as Natvig points out (p. 180), is not previously reported there, it would be rather Eurocentric to suppose that this was the first occasion on which significant social changes had occurred affecting the socio-economic status of large sections of society. These nineteenth century upheavals may, however, have been particularly acute, entailing novel social pressures such as might be expected to encourage the spread of a cult which embraces change by transforming symbols of it into spirits which, although they disturb women, can be placated. But there must have been similarly far-reaching currents of change in earlier centuries in the Maghrib (see, e.g. Abu-Nasr, 1987) with correspondingly powerful effects on the socio-economic position of men and women. There obviously have also been many different periods of Islamic intensification in the past which must have affected women and their relative seclusion.

Again, as with *zar-bori*, dramatic social change may provide fertile soil for the germination and spread of women's possession cults, but such marginal possession cults also exist for quite long periods in what might be described as 'steady-state' conditions. After all, they address such profound and perennial problems as infertility, competition and conflict between co-wives and reactions to male oppression that exist frequently independently of externally caused severe social disruption. Thus, even without pre-European induced change and stress, women in the past must have needed ways of explaining, and finding meaning in, affliction. Throughout its known history, with its recognition of the power of *jinn* and other marginal spirits, and the susceptibility to them ascribed to women, Islam has provided an armoury for women to mobilise in spirit-attributed explanations of affliction, and a potential for cult elaboration, either within the Sufi mystical framework (as in much of contemporary Islamic North Africa) or outside it as in *zar-bori*. Hence, as Natvig rightly argues, the absence of references to *zar* in Egypt before the 1860s in no way excludes the existence of beliefs in peripheral spirits, particularly associated with women and women's afflictions; nor does it preclude the existence of earlier *zar*-type cults – of which we have at present no record. The possibility of such cults in Egypt as elsewhere is as old as beliefs in such spirits. (Much the same applies equally in the case of Christian Ethiopia, where the Christian spirit hierarchy, with a perhaps more unambiguous concept of evil spirits – associated with the Devil – has been

available, at least in principle, since the introduction of Christianity in the fourth century.)

Where, in the past, present or future, popular religion includes beliefs in marginal spiritual forces of this kind, they constitute a spiritual reservoir (frequently updated) which can be drawn upon to respond to the experience of affliction and stress in ways which make this meaningful to the victims and their families. Only when people cease to believe in spirits does recourse to them become ineffective and, fundamentally, irrational and therefore a sign of detachment from reality. Such a situation is not likely to be reached simultaneously or homogeneously across a complex, multi-class society such as that of modern Egypt, or any other North African state. Moreover, as the case of Japan so forcefully reminds us, 'modernisation' and extreme technological development can readily coexist with a wide gamut of animist beliefs, religions and cults. Indeed, there is some indication that the problems created or exacerbated by technological development invite and encourage mystical solutions, further entrenching such beliefs. When these relate significantly to national, as well as personal, identity, further impetus is given to the maintenance of the 'sacred canopy'. Our Kuwait example is perhaps as good a one as any of the quest for relief from 'future shock' in meaningful, spiritual terms.

## **PART I**

# **THE ETHIOPIAN FOUNDATION**