

The Sudanese Concept of Beauty, Spirit Possession, and Power

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In this paper, I will discuss the phenomenon of spirit possession in Sudan, its relationship to the concept of beauty, and the way in which the image of power in connection with spirit possession is created and constructed within the Sudanese cosmological vision. Ultimately, I wish to explore the potentiality, limitation, and expansion of power in human action, mainly among women.

The study of spirit possession in connection with power in Africa raises many questions. First, the idea of power becomes problematic when applied to African societies because the term *power* itself is a western concept, created and developed throughout its history by western thinkers, mainly by social and political scientists. They perceived power as an element of control and domination to achieve a practical end. Max Weber states that “power is the probability that one actor in a relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis” (1947:152). The term *power*, in this sense, carries a political connotation and explains how power is exercised to achieve specific goals. This way of defining power raises many questions. Scholars argue that it is limited and does not take into account other aspects of power which would help define the concept more fully (Arens and Karp 1984:xiv-xv). Weber expanded his definition later in his career, but the question of power as it relates to other parts of the world and to other cultural contexts remained unanswered in his work. Sources of power in Africa lie in the interaction between natural, social, and spiritual realms (Arens and Karp 1984:xvii). This way of perceiving power is distinctively African as opposed to western. In many African societies, for instance, the individual mostly works toward fulfilling the collective will. The same, however, cannot be said of the western world.

Second, there is a lack of consensus among scholars who have studied the cult of spirit possession in general and within the “Islamic communities” in

particular with regard to power and women. Some scholars link the higher visibility of women in spirit possession to male domination and to the lower status of females in the religious hierarchy (e.g. Cloudsley 1983:79). Others consider that whereas men enjoy participation in the greater religious ceremonies, women are rigorously excluded from them (Lewis 1966:311). Some scholars interpret the prominent role of women in spirit possession as compensation for the exclusion from and lack of authority in other spheres (Hall and Ismail 1981:185; Kenyon 1991:234; Last 1991:50). Ioan Lewis assumes that those possessed by the spirit are mainly deprived and frustrated (1966:318). Samia al-Nagar, in her study of spirit possession in Sudan, deals with the phenomenon from a social standpoint. She argues that:

Conflicts in family relationships also contribute to the prevalence of *Zar* [spirit possession]. Failure to fulfill some social role [as a result] of being barren, [remaining] unmarried or divorced promote association with the cult. These social factors may contribute to the kind of psychological disturbances which are interpreted as signs of possession. (1987:104)

Iris Berger suggests a different social purpose. She states, "the cult functions as a vehicle for expressing hostility against the social order in general or against particular people, especially those with a superior status" (1976:127), and others refer to the cult as a gender war between spouses (e.g. Abdalla 1991:41).

Although the researchers mentioned above all deal with the phenomenon of spirit possession as a social problem, there is a measure of disagreement. Some attribute the active role of women in the cult as a religious, class, or gender question. Some study the cult from an economic standpoint, while others deal with the phenomenon as a psychological disorder. This explains the inconsistency of ideas among the researchers when they interpret the *Zar* cult in connection with women. When interpreting spirit possession, these scholars generally agree on a few specific points: the powerlessness, dependency, and subordination of women who are possessed by spirits.

Third, although the researchers study the phenomenon of spirit possession from various perspectives, they have neglected the mechanism of the cult and its relation to other factors that influence its existence. They rely on interpretive methods which have an unfortunate tendency to isolate cultural phenomena from their political and economic contexts as well as from the motives and beliefs of the performers (Woodward and Russell 1989:19). The latter factors are essential in formulating the context within which the cultural phenomenon is created. As Henry Glassie states, "context is not in the eye of the beholder, but in the mind of the creator. Contexts

are mental associations woven around texts during performance to shape and complete them, to give them meaning" (1982:33). We should consider indigenous concepts carefully and recognize that the comprehensive study of power involves all conceivable qualities of a person and all conceivable combinations of circumstances (Weber 1947:153). That means, in dealing with indigenous cases of spirit possession when connected with power, we must look into the entire process that creates the phenomenon. Ironically, current interpretive approaches often isolate ritual from its context to the extent that indigenous exposition and the cosmological, social, and economic goals of ritual fade into obscurity (Woodward and Russell 1989:19). This creates a problematic situation which is not simply one of ethics, reflexivity, or liability—"letting informants speak for themselves." It is fundamentally a question of explanatory and even descriptive inadequacy because the indigenous are aware of what ritual intends to accomplish (1989:19).

The scholars who studied the Zar cult in Sudan have left untouched the concept of beauty in connection with spirit possession, and yet an understanding of the Sudanese concept of beauty is essential to understanding the full meaning of spirit possession and its relationship to power as a key term for the whole context.

In this paper, I will rely on data obtained from fieldwork conducted by the Department of Folklore, Institute of African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum in October 1989, in al-Kalakela, a suburb of Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. I was a graduate student in the Folklore Department during this time and was one of the team members who participated in the fieldwork—interviewing, observing, taking notes, and recording on audio tape the activities surrounding the ritual of the Zar, an enactment of spirit possession which was held in the house of Sheikh Muhammad Mahmoud Wad Hulla, a leader of the Zar cult. I will be analyzing data from a video cassette representing the Zar rituals. Since the video represents *Yomiyya* (a celebrated one-day show), I will depend also on data that I have collected from other Zar performances.

The Social Environment

Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, the largest African country (1 million square miles), consists of three towns: Khartoum, located between the White Nile and the Blue Nile; Khartoum North, at the east bank of the river Nile; and Omdurman, at the west bank of the Nile. Al-Kalakela is a residential extension of Khartoum, situated on its southern side, in which Sheikh Muhammad's house is located. The inhabitants of the area are from a wide variety of backgrounds and from different places in Sudan. Sheikh Muhammad himself is originally from Donqia, in northern Sudan, from which he expanded his activities into the areas which include Port Sudan, on the

Red Sea (eastern Sudan), and al-Kalakela. The majority of the population are Muslims; and Arabic is the lingua franca.

Generally, Sudanese social relations are extremely tight, and the family represents a focal point in the society. Ismail and Makki refer to it as:

A "reservoir," which combines economic assistance, political influence, social support and psychological security. Associations with relatives have a complicated interaction of reciprocal rights and duties which guarantee a network of support for the individual in all aspects of life. These associations are enlivened by informal visits and sporadic exchanges of favours and, on the other hand, they are dutifully and religiously conducted on special occasions such as weddings, funerals, circumcisions, and Islamic festivities when all family members are under obligation to participate and contribute. (1990:18)

Thus, the Sudanese lifestyle is characterized by strong social relations which reflect a collective order in maintaining the values of the Islamic belief system. The religious belief system plays a significant and influential role in Sudanese life, particularly in cases such as spirit possession.

Spirit Possession and the Belief System

To understand spirit possession in Sudanese Muslim communities, one must look into the religious belief system, the way people conceptualize the universe—their cosmological vision. The Sudanese Muslim concept of the universe is reflected in the way the people practice Islam. The people of Sudan were converted to Islam at the beginning of the fourteenth century, after the collapse of the Christian kingdom of Donqola in northern Sudan (Trimingham 1947:74). Muslims represent seventy percent of the population, Christians four percent, and the remaining are animists (Deng and Minear 1992:14).

There are crucial differences between the popular or folk practice of Islam and Orthodox Islam. Unlike Orthodox Islam—which recognizes Allah and Prophet Muhammad, his servant and messenger—the Sudanese religious order operates under a larger hierarchy. At the top is Allah, next in importance is the prophet Muhammad, and third-ranked are Awliya (saints). Sudanese Muslim cosmology also includes aerial spirits, nature (plants, animals, mountains, etc.), the human world, and the underworld (Hurreiz 1977:9). Allah dominates and controls all these categories. Sudanese Muslims believe that these categories are signs of Allah's existence, and their belief in these signs confirms their belief in Allah because the categories reflect Allah's omnipotence. People believe that the Awliya, the aerial spirits, and all the other categories mentioned above have the power to help and protect them from

other forces in the universe which represent evil. Spirit possession—or Zar—is one of those forces that protects and helps them.

On the other hand, the most influential force that negatively affects people's lives is the "evil eye." Alan Dundes states that the evil eye is a:

fairly consistent and uniform folk belief complex based on the idea that an individual male or female has the power voluntarily or involuntarily to cause harm to another individual or his property, merely by looking at or praising that person or property. (1992:258)

People believe that beauty is subject to the desire of people who have the power to cause harm by looking at a person or at his or her property. Fear of the supernatural power of the evil eye is fairly common among men and women except among those who are extremely religious and who thus resist any association with such supernatural beliefs (al-Nagar 1987:103). Many educated people also consider the evil eye to be a superstition. Dundes suggests that the belief in the evil eye is common in the Indo-European and Semitic worlds but is largely absent among Sub-Saharan Africa. He attributes its flourishing in Maghrib to the influence of Islam. Fear of supernatural powers and their associated elements, however, is common among contemporary Muslims in Sudan, but also dates back to ancient times. Excavations in Sudan show varieties of amulets which were used in prehistoric periods. Peter Shinnie mentions that "Flies, cowry shells, and rams' heads are common as amulets" (1967:125). Since protection is one of the roles of amulets, presumably the archaeological findings confirmed the existence of the tradition and practice associated with the evil forces.

Al-Razi, a Muslim scholar, in his commentary on Sura 2, Ayat 102, of the Quran, characterizes magic—the act of the evil eye—as a psychical phenomenon that produces physical effects. The Quran bears testimony to the fact that the magic and spells have effects of their own upon the human mind. Ibn Khaldon, a Muslim scholar, develops the psychical view of al-Razi still further and clarifies it until it practically coincides with the modern psychological doctrines of the intense impact of thought on the human mind (Siddqi 1990:1192-93).

The Quran, therefore, confirms the existence of these evil forces but asks people to seek refuge with Allah from them and not to take shelter with other forces such as jinns. As mentioned in the Quran, the jinns are invisible creatures (Sura 27, Ayat 7) created out of fire (Sura 55, Ayat 15). Spirit possession, people believe, is one of the activities of those jinns.

My informant, *Haja* Batoul, (*Haja* is a title given to a woman who has made a pilgrimage to the Muslim holy place) is a housewife and mother, about 60 years old, who is from a religious Islamic family. When I asked her

if there was a specific group of people who are capable of causing harm by looking, she replied that “people believe every human being, if concentrating on a particular person or his or her properties with envy, is capable of causing harm, to the extent that he or she might cause death by looking.” Oyler suggests, however, that the Shilluk (a Sudanese group in the southern region) claim that the evil eye is something which can be inherited (1992:80). Abdullahi Ibrahim found that among the Rubatab (a Sudanese group from the northern region), there is a group of people who have the power to cause harm by using words in a metaphorical way. This might happen during speech events in which a speaker attempts to cast on or “shoot” (the evil eye) at a person or an object by comparing them to something else (1987:1).

According to Haja Batoul the evil forces can only be suppressed by saying “*Ma sha’ Allah*,” which literally means “this is what Allah willed.” The person who might otherwise be affected by the evil eye, by mentioning this phrase, will resist the evil forces and release himself or herself from their power. In so doing, the person will find refuge with Allah while also suppressing the forces that might harm other people. A victim also might be protected by uttering traditional expressions such as “*ya’ ayn qaharik Allah*,” which literally means, “Oh eye, Allah suppressed you.” These words will ward off the evil eye by depending on the force of Allah. Reciting some verses from the Quran or saying “*Allah Akbar*,” which means, when used in this context, “Allah is greater and able to suppress the devil’s work,” plays the same role in protecting the person. People believe that if they pray at a person who is capable of harm by looking while he or she is sleeping, the prayer will ward off the evil forces (this kind of prayer is usually done for the dead before they are buried). They perceive sleeping to be a kind of small death, and therefore the soul will depart the body during this time. When the person awakens, he or she will become a new person with a new soul that cannot harm again.

Another informant, Haja Amna—who is 85 years old and from a religious Islamic family—told me that when the evil eye is directed at a person, the Zar spirit will come between the person and the evil power to protect him or her. Otherwise the person will be destroyed by the evil eye. People believe that spirits not only protect a person from the evil eye but also protect that person’s beauty.

The Concept of Beauty and Spirit Possession

Beauty, according to the Sudanese conception, is always capable of causing difficulties, troubles, calamities, and bad fortune on account that it attracts the evil eye. The notion of beauty and its counterpart ugliness is illustrated in the literature of the Sudanese, whose social life is full of anecdotes

about how beauty generates troubles and calamities for a person and those around him or her, whereas ugliness is always surrounded with happiness and good fortune. The story of Tajoj and al-Muhalag is the most famous narrative that depicts the suffering caused by Tajoj's beauty. Not only did the two lovers suffer, but their whole tribe and the neighboring tribes suffered. Tajoj was so beautiful that she inspired the sin of pride in her husband, who showed her off in her nudity, compelling her to ask for a divorce for having been humiliated by presenting her nude body to a stranger (al-Muhalag's friend). Eventually, al-Muhalag agreed to give her a divorce (against his will) in order to keep his promise as an honorable man. The story of Tajoj and al-Muhalag led to hostilities between tribes, and ultimately Tajoj was slain to stop the bloodshed. The story is a living story. People still recite the poetry which describes Tajoj's beauty, and still refer to al-Muhalag's description of her—so shapely that a watermelon could fit in the curvature of her waist between her ribs and her hip—as a standard for beauty today. And people carry with them the knowledge that Tajoj's beauty drove her to death and al-Muhalag to madness.

On the other hand, people are not threatened by ugliness. Wherever one finds ugliness, one finds good luck, convenience, and peaceful life because ugliness doesn't attract the evil eye, but rather deflects it. One Sudanese saying comes to mind, *sa'ad a-shaina hiba-laina*, meaning literally "may the good fortune of the ugly woman blow upon us." Haja Amona, a 75-year-old mother of one son, told me that this saying is usually uttered by boatmen in mid-river or mid-sea when there is no wind to make their boat run. By saying this phrase, they actually ask for good fortune.

Haja Amona told me a Sudanese *qissa* (story) about a woman who was so ugly that she herself could not believe she would attract any man, yet it happened. A very beautiful prince fell in love with her and asked her for marriage. She always put on her *Tobe*, a Sudanese Muslim dress that covers the whole body except for the face and hands, to hide her ugliness, even at home, because she did not want her husband to see her bald head. One day while the prince was hunting, the woman took a breather, released herself from her clothes, and went into a deep sleep. When she awakened, she asked her maid if any one had come during her sleep. The maid answered that only the prince had come. When she heard this, the woman lost her temper and asked what happened when her husband came. Did he leave because he saw her in this miserable situation? To her surprise, the maid said that the prince had been so excited that he knelt and kissed her. Her mouth was open while she slept, and flies went in and out. The prince kindly kept away the flies and said, "even the flies share with me her love!" The woman decided to leave home immediately. On her way, as she was crossing the desert, she saw a garden. She went towards it. When she arrived, a beautiful man appeared. She froze.

She wanted to run, but the beautiful man asked her to stop. He introduced himself as her good fortune, the way her husband would see her, looking beyond her ugliness to see the hidden beauty. In fact, her real beauty was sealed or protected by her ugliness. Her beauty would only be revealed to the one who loved and protected it. Therefore, while her real beauty could not be harmed, revealed beauty was capable of being exposed by evil forces.

The idea of beauty is connected to more than mere physical features. Beauty can also be found in good behavior, skills, knowledge, dress, and so forth. All these characteristics represent beauty to the Sudanese, and this beauty, as well as physical beauty, must be protected from evil forces. Protection usually takes the form of barriers that ward off evil's harm. All the Sudanese rites of passage, from birth until death, stress protection from the evil eye (Hurreiz 1967). Protection usually takes the form of dressing the person who is capable of attracting the evil eye in objects such as rings made of silver, beads, and amulets which attract the evil eye while at the same time deflecting its power from the person. Also, enclosing the person in beautiful colors and designs turns away the evil eye. Any of these forms of protection are manifested in rituals. Zar is one of the rituals conducted to appease the spirit that protects a person and enables him or her to manage a potentially threatening situation. These rituals illustrate the complexity of Sudanese culture rather than representing Islamic order, as I will explain later.

Zar Origin

Some scholars who study the etymology of the word *Zar* associate the word with the Persian language and confirm the existence of the practice of the cult in southern and south-western Persia (Constantinides 1991:84-5). Others presume that the word is Amharic, while still others state that the Amhara have borrowed the word from the Arabic language. Some argue that Amharic is a Semitic language and *Zar* is a non-Semitic form. They suggest that the term is derived from Cushitic (Constantinides 1991:85). *Zar*, or *dastor* or *rih ahmar* (red wind), however, are words used synonymously in Sudan to refer to healing practices and rituals connected with spirit possession (al-Nagar 1987:93). Ismail Abdalla also writes that *Sullah* (saints), *Zar*, and *assyad* (masters) are names commonly used among Arabic-speaking peoples in Africa and the Middle East to designate spirits that mount patients in spirit possession ceremonies (1987:46). The *Zar* cult, though called by different names, is widespread in Africa even among non-Muslims (Last 1991:83).

In Sudan, people also refer to *Zar* as *Bori*, the same word used by the Hausa in Nigeria to identify a spirit possession cult. Sudanese, in calling *Zar Bori*, actually differentiate between two types of practices: *Tumbura* and *Bori*. According to al-Naqar, *Bori* is considered feminine whereas

Tumbura is masculine. Unlike Bori, Tumbura is aggressive, more violent. The drumming and singing in Tumbura is mainly done by men with a leader called *Sanjak* (al-Nagar 1987:96), whereas in Zar Bori singing and drumming are mostly female activities. In addition, there are crucial differences in the instruments and, consequently, the music. Tumbura is connected with the underwater world which resembles the *Edo* spirit possession cult in Benin City, Nigeria (Paula Ben-Amos 1994:118-134). Zar Bori has little to do with the underwater world. In fact, those spirits in the Zar Bori who are connected to the underwater world are related to the Tumbura realm. The Zar Bori spirits belong mainly to dry lands, jungles, and mountains.

Trimingham mentions that the Zar cult represents a pre-Islamic demon which is alien to Islam (1947:175). Constantinides argues that:

the cult, basically non-Islamic, drew upon and incorporated elements from a wide variety of cultural influences; the principal syncretism, however, was with the main cultural influence of the area, that of Islam. (1991:91)

She argues further that the cult in Sudan was repressed during the period of the *Mahdiyya*, an Islamic state that existed in Sudan from 1881 to 1898, and emerged with new vigor when the Sudan was again occupied by British Colonial forces (1991:91). Yet in the Sudanese Muslim concept, a myth gives Zar its religious significance and is incorporated into the belief structure.

My informant Haja Amna told me a qissa about how the Zar spirit is perceived in Sudanese culture. She said that people believe that the Zar is from a group of spirits which was controlled by the Prophet Sulyiman. As revealed in the Holy Quran, Prophet Sulyiman dominates all the jinns and all the creatures in the universe. In Sura, Ants 27 Ayat 17, Allah says, "And before Solomon [Sulyiman] were marshaled his hosts, of Jinns and men, and birds, and they were all kept in order and ranks."

Haja Amna continued the qissa:

During the time that prophet Sulyiman was praying, a repulsive creature appeared to him in the sky. He felt shocked to the extent that every hair on his body stood on end. Prophet Sulyiman controlled himself and asked the creature to descend to earth and tell him who he was, but the Zar refused. Zar, who loves beauty and fun, would come only at the end of the world, and possess men and women, except those who are guided by Allah. It is thus believed that Zar—who can be represented in male or female form—is the only one that Sulyiman could not control, and for this reason, people make offerings to him and feel more at ease with him than with other jinns. They believe that other jinns usually caused real harm to human beings.

The same qissa is discussed in al-Nagar's article with minor differences (1987:94). Ellen Ismail, on the other hand, states that Zar was introduced to Sudan from Ethiopia (1982:54). In Ethiopian mythology, Zar are hidden creatures who originated in the Garden of Eden.

According to the mythology of the Zar cult, the Zar spirits originated in the Biblical Garden of Eden at the same time humanity was created. They assumed physical form when Eve began to bear children. Eve is believed to have had thirty children. One day, when God the creator came to visit and began an account of the children, Eve (evidently fearing the evil eye), hid the fifteen most beautiful ones. God, being all-knowing, realized this, and became angry. As punishment, he decreed that the fifteen hidden children always remain hidden, invisible, night creatures, for all eternity. The present-day Zar spirits are believed to be descended from them. The Zar spirits are more powerful and more beautiful than humans, know remedies for all ailments, but envy their uglier and weaker human brothers and sisters who are day-time children of the light. (Messing 1985:300)

In Nigeria, people also connect the phenomenon of spirit possession with a religious origin.

Throughout the Hausaland, an Islamic tradition which is linked to a myth of the creation of man and woman states that the possession spirits (also called Bori, a word which actually means 'to boil') are the descendants of the children which Adam and Eve hid from the creator. In fact, God had asked to see Adam and Eve's offspring, but Eve, suspicious, persuaded Adam to present only half of them, and to hide the fattest and strongest children in the bush. But Allah, being able to be in several places at once, punished Adam and Eve for their lack of trust by transforming the hidden children into invisible beings who were able to reproduce and proliferate afterwards. Thus, both men and bori spirits had the same ancestors and the history of the origin of the bori spirit was integrated into the Islamic origin myth. (Echard 1991:65-66)

These passages suggest that the Ethiopian and the Hausa myths illustrate the Zar origin of creation, whereas the Sudanese myth suggests how people received the ritual by a mythological being and the beginning of its activities on earth. The appearance of the creature to prophet Suliyman was the sign of the existence of those hidden creatures. Moreover, one might find some elements that could connect the three myths. For example, beauty, ugliness, and hidden creatures are the characteristic features in the Sudanese, Ethiopian, and Hausa concepts of spirit possession. In Hausa myth, beauty is represented

by fatness and strength as a measure that is also one criteria of Sudanese beauty. Balghis Bedri states that a Sudanese woman has to put on weight during the period after giving birth as a sign of beauty, good care, and comfort (1987:74). In the Sudanese concept, however, beauty goes beyond physical appearances, as I mentioned before, and includes other factors. Beauty, therefore, represents a central point in association with spirit possession or Zar, not only in Sudan but also in Ethiopia and Nigeria.

Some researchers suggest other factors which seem to contribute to the cultural phenomenon that link Sudan, Ethiopia, and Nigeria in terms of Zar activities. Anne Cloudsley writes, "I was once in Tamanrasset, traveling across the Sahara along the *Routee du Hoggar* from Algiers to Kano in Northern Nigeria, when I heard the sound of drums and singing very reminiscent of the Zar in Omdurman [Sudan]" (1983:56).

Thus, the existence of the same tradition and the similarities in these mythological concepts suggests diffusion since Sudan is a cross-roads in Africa, linking West Africa with the Red Sea and also sharing a border with Ethiopia. According to Franz Boas, the distribution and spread of tales proved that in most cases the occurrence of similar tales is due to diffusion (1938:612). It has been confirmed historically that the ancient Sudanese had contact with other countries inside and outside the continent. They maintained manifold trade and cultural connections through their contact. In so doing, Sudanese culture absorbed and combined with other cultural influences to form a creative synthesis (Hurreiz 1972:23). In this respect, Pamela Constantinides draws upon the work of Frobenius, an early German diffusionist, who believed that:

throughout history there have been routes for passage of men, trade, and ideas between the riverain northern Sudan, Lake Chad, and Hausa states, and that with the penetration of Islam into West Africa, these had developed into regular routes for pilgrims to Mecca. (1991:84)

Further, Constantinides writes that Frobenius even held the assumption that Zar and Bori were manifestations of an earlier belief system derived from Persia which spread throughout the grassland belt from the Abyssinian highlands [Ethiopia] through Kordofan [Sudan] to Hausaland (1991:84). Frobenius's assumption implies that these countries not only communicated with one another, but also shared cultural traits. Searching for the origin of the Zar leads scholars from different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities to never-ending debates. Elliott Oring writes that origins must be found in historical antecedents (1976:67-80). Nonetheless, mythological concepts have ascribed an origin to Zar. Boas states that "the mythological explanation shows clearly that the ritual itself is the stimulus for the formation of the myth" (1938:617).

The Zar Rituals, Preparation, and Performance

In Sheikh Muhammad's house, where Zar Bori is conducted, one finds the widowed, married, unmarried, divorced, and even some children among the followers. Diverse social classes, ages, and educational backgrounds as well as both sexes are represented. My informants in all of these categories described instances of feeling sick, consulting a medical doctor or *al-Faki* (a religious healer), and not obtaining relief. The Faki then told the particular person to go see the Zar *Sheikha*, known also as *Usta* (master), *Ummyiya*, or *Kudiya*, words of Sudanese colloquial Arabic indicating knowledge, authority, and leadership (Ismail 1982:55). Sometimes the leader of a cult might be male and thus be called Sheikh, for instance, Sheikh Muhammad Hulla. Other times, they are female and referred to as Sheikha, Ummyiya, or Kudiya. Although the Zar performance includes both men and women, I will focus mainly on female cases.

A number of informants along with their relatives and friends confirmed that what happened to the Zar possessors was originally caused by the evil eye because of their beauty. Symptoms might entail *shahtafat-ruh* (shortening of the breath) and *Khofa* (fearing the unknown) or bleeding, headache, and vomiting.

Case Studies

Although I interviewed several people at Sheikh Muhammad's home, I will focus only on two examples to illustrate how the concept of beauty is connected with spirit possession within the Sudanese cosmos.

The aunt of Ibtisam, a seven year old who was possessed by a spirit, told me:

In Sudan, women generally depend on mid-wives in helping them when they give birth, in addition to their close relatives. But in Ibtisam's case, a stranger had attended her birth. When the mother gave birth to Ibtisam, the child was very beautiful and healthy. The stranger, watching at the time of the delivery, couldn't control herself, and gave a big sigh, after which the baby started shaking. The family brought Ibtisam to the doctor, without any hopeful results. Finally, they decided to go to a Faki, who explained that Ibtisam's condition was due to her being shot by an evil eye during the time of her birth. The evil eye should have destroyed her, but the Zar had come between Ibtisam and the evil eye. In other words, the Zar had protected her and decreased the damage. The Faki asked them to go to the Zar's Sheikha because it was too late for him to help her: if the case were in its earlier stages he could have protected the child. Ibtisam's family took the Faki's advice and visited

a Sheikha who confirmed Ibtisam's possession with spirits. As a result, the family conducted a Zar ceremony for the baby, by means of which she recovered and continued with the Zar and its rituals.

Trimingham, who studied Sudanese people and their traditions, states that:

children are thought to be particularly susceptible to the evil of the envious when he [she] envies, thus they are always protected with Hijabs [amulets]. In its simplest form, anyone who envies may cast the evil eye. For that reason, one should not comment on the health or handsomeness of a child, except by using such expressions as *ma sha' Allah*. (1947:170)

The second case that I dealt with was Ihsan. Ihsan is a brilliant student at Cairo University (the Khartoum branch which recently became Al-Nilain University) who suddenly got sick. When Ihsan came to see Sheikh Muhammad, she was almost dying. Ihsan's mother told me that what happened to her daughter was *'ayn* (evil eye) because of her high academic ability. She was experiencing severe headaches and continuously vomited large amounts of blood. But when Sheikh Muhammad started curing her, the vomiting stopped, and she began to feel better. Ihsan and her family, in their search for a cure, visited a number of physicians without any positive results. The prognosis was always that she had "no disease," but still she felt ill. As a result, she came to Sheikh Muhammad, who recommended a Zar ceremony for her cure. Her family began to prepare for a Zar ritual. They began by *Fath al 'ellba* (tin box opening), the first stage in Zar rituals.

Fath al 'ellba or the Initiation

The *'ellba* (tin box) symbolizes the Sheikha's power, and represents a means of communication between her and the spirit world. In fact, the tin box is the gift that the Sheikha receives when she is initiated as a cult leader. The Sheikha herself, before initiation, must suffer and perform the Zar ritual and maintain good relations with the spirit world. This will qualify her to become a Sheikha. The Sheikha is an essential figure in Zar rituals. She is the one who controls the entire situation and mediates between the spirit world and the possessed person. In addition to the Sheikha, there is the Sheikha's chorus who helps her by singing and drumming. The chorus usually consists of women, but sometimes includes men; all have experience in Zar performance. At Sheikh Muhammad's place, the chorus is a mixture of men and women.

The *'ellba* contains all the different incenses that call and provoke spirits. Whenever the Sheikha burns any kind of incense, she is invoking the

appearance of the specific spirit that has possessed the person. When the spirit comes forth, it speaks from the mouth of the person. Then the Sheikha asks the spirit to reveal his or her wishes, and when it starts to speak, the Sheikha slaughters a pair of doves and rubs the blood onto the devotee's forehead, hands, and feet. Sheikh Muhammad informed me that in previous times, the devotee drank the blood, but because Islam prohibits blood-drinking, the blood is now smeared outside the body of the devotee. Sheikh Muhammad employs attitudes and techniques different from those practiced by earlier people in order to meet the Islamic order which prohibits the drinking of wine and blood. Sheikh Muhammad also forbids smoking which is said to be *Makruh* (discouraged) in Islam. This prohibition is an Islamization and acculturation of the Zar cult done by a single person under oppression from political forces. It gives Zar its "Islamic" significance in order to guarantee its continued practice.¹

In the next phase of initiation, a ring of silver is dipped into the blood of the doves and given to the devotee as protection. People believe that silver is more protective than any other metal. Victor Turner, in his study of Ndembu culture, shows how that group employed some objects and vegetables which they believed to be powerful resources in curing some diseases. He draws an analogy between these medical materials and laser beams in their power to destroy malignant forces (1987:43). The same analogy can be applied to the Sudanese when they use the silver as a powerful force for protection.

This first stage of the ritual, *Tasbera*, literally means temporary cure, and lasts until the main rituals are conducted. These rituals require special preparation which varies depending on which spirit is invoked.

The Classifications of Zar spirits

According to Sheikh Muhammad, spirits are classified into different groups: *Darawish* (dervish or Sufi), who are sometimes called *Ahl Allah*, which literally means God's people; *Habash* (Ethiopian); and Arabs. Interestingly, the Sudanese identify nomads as Arabs. In fact, this group includes some spirits who are racially considered not Arabs, for instance Ahmad al Beshir al Hadandawi (*Hadandawa* are from a Hematic origin). In the Sudanese conception, sometimes the term "race" is not necessarily connected with blood relationship, but perceived in social and geographical terms. Next in the Zar groups are *Pashawat* (Turko-Egyptian), *Khawajat* (white, non-Muslim), and *Zurg* (black or Sudanese).² Other Zar characters operate as groups, such as *al-banat* (the girls). Yet others exist as individuals, such as the "Chinese."

The Zar order operates under a hierarchy according to the Zar characters' political, religious, and social positions. Sultan Borno, for instance, and Menilik malik al-Habash (King Menilik of Abyssinia) represent a political status at the top of the hierarchy. Sheikh abdel Qadir al-Jaylani represents a

Sufi sect, whereas Sheikh al-Arab (The Arab's chief) represents a social position. Each of these spirits is recognized by particular characteristics and has special requirements such as songs, dances, and clothing.

The Preparations for Ritual

Sayyid Hurreiz states that:

like festivals and other folk drama, Zar combines different genres such as singing, drumming, and dancing. It also involves and utilizes artistic expressions and methods such as folk costumes, conventional theatrical devices, make-up, incense, etc. (1991:147)

Aziza, a sixty-year-old member of Sheikh Muhammad's chorus, said that preparation for the ceremony is conditioned by the Sheikh's demand that the spirit "open to the devotee." In this stage, the opening means facilitating the spirit's needs. If the spirit is fulfilled, then the ritual is conducted. Otherwise the devotee will continue to experience symptoms until the ritual preparation is completed.

The devotee's family, neighbors, and friends will show their interest in assisting in the devotee's treatment and in the preparations for the ritual. People cooperating in preparation for the ritual are motivated by the notion that they are morally obligated to support one another. Halima, a forty-seven-year-old widow and the mother of three daughters and one son, told me how she obtained specific clothes from London sent by her cousin as there had been difficulty in finding this kind of clothing in Sudan. With the spirit's help, she believes, she received these clothes from England.

Those who are possessed by Beshir Habashi (Beshir the Ethiopian) require a medical doctor's uniform and medical tools in order to practice their profession in Zar performance as physicians. Other spirits have different demands that must be prepared before the ritual begins. Costumes are the most important in ritual performance. Among the costumes, one finds Sudanese, Ethiopian, Turkish, and European dress. Luliyya, the Ethiopian spirit, unlike others, must wear a Sudanese dress (not an Ethiopian one), which is designed for a bride with fine fabric and red color. Like other colors that are used in Zar rituals, red has symbolic meaning in Sudan, symbolizing sex, fertility, strength, and passion. The red dress is usually worn by a Sudanese bride on her wedding night. Luliyya wears jewelry and Sudanese perfume in order to receive words that praise the devotee's beauty from the audience and participants. Some spirits identify themselves by wearing objects that symbolize the jungle; *Nimr al-Khala* (Tiger of the wilderness), for instance, must put on a tiger skin and hold a stick, usually made of ivory and ebony,

and a decorated shield with shells and beads representing his majesty and his prestigious status. Thus, every spirit has its own costumes and accessories which vary according to the spirit's place of origin and gender, in addition to its political, religious, or social status. Generally, the devotee must have a beautiful and attractive garment with accessories, and she or he must meet other demands such as food and drink to satisfy the spirit's pride.

The Zar Performance

The Sudanese prohibit Zar ritual performance during *Sha'aban*, *Ramadan*, *Shawal*, *Zul Qa'ida*, and *Zul-Hajja*. During these months, Muslims fast and make a *Hajj* (pilgrimage to the Muslim holy place). For these reasons, Sheikh Muhammad told me, in *Rajab*, the month before *Sha'aban*, which is followed by *Ramadan*—all the Zar boxes must be closed, and only later opened after *Zul-Hajja*. The ceremony practiced to close the boxes is called *Rajabiyya*, a reference to the month *Rajab*. Every devotee should be equipped with incense, which allows her to release herself during the months mentioned above.

The rituals usually last between three and seven days, depending on the devotee's economic situation. If the ritual is conducted for seven days, the days are divided between the Zar's groups, and every group will have its own day. The first day usually starts with the *Darawish*, who put on white or green. The songs are similar to a Sufi *Zikr* recitation and devotion. The *Darawish* are characterized by their peacefulness and serene nature. The group followed by the *Darawish* are *al-Banat*. These spirits are representative of diverse groups, which include not only the Sudanese but also Ethiopians, Moroccans, and Nigerians. Their costumes vary according to their cultural origin, and different songs and rhythms represent the group identities. The third day is designated for the *Pashawat* (singular *Pasha*), who wear Turkish traditional dress, smoke pipes, and hold decorative leather sticks and handkerchiefs. The rhythm of the *Pashawat* stresses solemnity and majesty. The Arab spirits follow the *Pashawat*. They put on typical Sudanese nomad costumes including accessories. The *Habash* group is welcomed and celebrated on the fifth day. Red is a favorite color to the *Habash* spirits. Their songs are joyous and happy with the highly rhythmic melodic characteristic of Ethiopian music. The last group are the *Zurg* who represent the force and strength of Africa. They wear black and their music is strong, passionate, and induces an aggressive dance. On the seventh and final day, all these groups perform and celebrate the renunciation and purification of the Zar devotee.

If the Zar ritual is performed between one and three days, the Sheikha must organize the spirits' presence according to their importance to the devotee's case. In this situation, the Sheikha usually concentrates on the

spirit that possesses the person, but in all cases the Zar ceremony must start with the Darawish group to give the ritual its religious context.

The devotee must be confined to the place of the Zar during the entire time that the ritual is conducted. Normally the Zar rituals are performed in the devotee's house. Sometimes, however, the outdoors is preferred to avoid any problem that might result from family or others who consider the cult contrary to the worship of Allah.

At Sheikh Muhammad's house, the Zar performance setting not only includes the devotee, but also a crowd of people whose presence is considered essential for the Zar performance. Zar performance demands an audience that is familiar with the ritual to enrich and energize the ceremony in order to satisfy the spirits' needs. Richard Bauman draws attention to the significance of an audience that is familiar with the performance scene; he writes that they constitute an expressive resource for performance. In fact, he confirms the vital role of participants as an interactional force in the performance setting (1986:18).

In Zar ritual, the audience is not confined to mere singing, clapping, commenting, and chanting, but they can also participate as Zar possessors. The audience members dance, speak as representations of the spirit personality, and act as consultants for people who come especially to the Zar place seeking cures. Interestingly enough, some of the audience might interact suddenly with the situation and be possessed by Zar for the first time. In the ritual at Sheikh Muhammad's, the newly Zar possessed created a new theme in Zar performance that developed and enriched the Zar performance. The Sheikh interfered to handle the situation because the "new possessee" became somewhat hostile requiring special attention. The Sheikh used all his knowledge and skills in Zar ritual to let the spirit that had possessed the person reveal his or her identity and wishes.

Some of the participants are creative and so famous in Zar performance that, before people go to the Zar ceremony, they ask if those particular performers will attend. Linda Dégh comments on the importance of the gifted performer who transforms the exact moment of performing into creative form (1989:47).

One of the participants at the ritual Zar I attended was a thirty-year-old housewife who was nine months pregnant and a mother of three. During the Zar performance, she danced and moved like a butterfly, as if she were not carrying a baby. When she finished and returned to her normal state, I asked her if this way of performing would affect her health. She answered that before she began dancing her body was tight, but after she performed Zar, she felt better; her body was released. She had performed Zar both before and after she got married, as well as during her previous pregnancies. These kinds of creative participants are the performers whom people

enjoy. The interdependency of the participants and the audience represents the backbone of the Zar ritual. Their presence creates the exact Zar ritual performance demanded by the spirit. It also shows the beauty of the devotees when performing in Zar ceremony — essentially the basis of the rituals. Thus, in Zar ritual, one might find a wide range of performances in different contexts at the same time, keeping the rituals in an active process, and giving the performance its richness and meaning.

The devotee, called “the bride of the Zar,” is dressed and perfumed like a typical Sudanese bride in order to symbolize the potentiality of marriage between the bride and the spirit, no matter which spirit is possessing her. The Zar session at Sheikh Muhammad’s place began with the burning of incense to invoke the spirits. After the drum was beaten and the Sheikh and his chorus accompanied by the audience had begun singing, the devotee began to dance. The songs of the Zar focus mainly on the music; in most cases, the words are simply the spirit’s name sung repeatedly in a rhythmic pattern. Sometimes, the words also praise the spirit’s beauty. The repetition confirms the spirit’s presence and exhausts the dancers. Through this activity, the performers reached a climax and released themselves. At this stage, the devotee went into a trance and took on the personality of the spirit. Ivan Karp describes this transformation as the struggling of the individual body—usually violently—to cast off the spirit that has taken over the host’s cognitive functions (1986:95-96). In fact, the devotee’s physical appearance completely changed—especially her facial expressions and her eyes. Her voice became altered to imitate the spirit voice. This moment is crucial in the devotee’s relationship with the spirit world. The role of Sheikh Muhammad was to communicate with the spirit and to show how the bride had made all possible efforts to appease the spirit. Accordingly, the spirit should “open” to the devotee and give her health and power.

The Closing Day of the Rituals

As previously mentioned, rituals last from three to seven days depending on the devotee’s financial situation. The last day of the ritual is considered the day of sacrifice, associated with blessing and purification. This is the day the *Maiz*, the greatest feast, takes place. Until twenty years ago, a sheep was slaughtered in a particular way in the name of the spirit as a sacrifice, but more recently the sheep is slaughtered in the name of Allah to give the ceremony its Muslim religious significance. A turkey must be the centerpiece of the table during the *Maiz*. This is the only occasion that the Sudanese eat turkey meat; they call the bird *Dinde*, which is generally known in the Sudan as “Rumi roaster.”

On this last day, the devotee concludes the ritual by going to the river at dawn to wash away all her dirtiness and to become purified. She encloses rings, silver icons, and beads by the Sheikha for protection. This act legitimizes and confirms the devotee's power. After this ritual, she will no longer be susceptible to the evil eye. Thus her beauty, in whatever form, will remain intact.

The Characteristics of a Devotee's Power

Al Haj Mohammad Kheir writes:

the matrilineal system continued to be significant in the political organization of the Islamic kingdoms that supplanted the Christian one. The gradual spread of Islam in Sudan allowed for accommodation and absorption of local cultures which resulted in continuity of the matrilineal system. (1987:38-39)

This continuity constitutes a platform for the significant role of contemporary Sudanese women, which is reflected in various spheres of Sudanese life including Zar rituals. Janice Boddy in studying gender relations in Sudan writes:

Indeed, whatever consciousness women have of themselves as a group is hardly one of inferiority and wholesale subordination to men, but of complementarity. As villagers see it, the sexes are engaged—not in a war—but in a dialectical relationship of qualitatively disparate yet socially equivalent parts, each commanding certain resources but reliant on the other for fulfillment. They do not conceive of themselves as locked in a struggle between classes, hierarchically understood. (1989:140)

This statement illustrates the interdependent and dialectical relationship between the sexes as it exists in Sudanese society. This means that each of the sexes has its own gender-specific characteristics. That is, the nature of the power obtained from the Zar ritual apparently does not stress control but rather “the more dynamic aspect of energy and the capacity to use it” (Arens and Karp 1989:xxi). This in itself gives the term “power,” when we use it in African context, its own definition which differs from the western concept of power.

Thus, the power obtained by the Zar devotee is perceived as a force in human interaction, not as an element of control or domination. It requires knowledge, skill, and faith. Karp, in studying the *Iteso* of Kenya, finds that power in spirit possession exists as central and peripheral depending on gender (1986). In Kenya, female power is at the center, while male power is at the periphery, that is, women are predominant, while men are excluded. This is

not the case with the Sudanese experience, in which both sexes enjoy the same power. Power is dependent on the creative role of the individual, not on gender.

How Power is Obtained

The first stage in obtaining power begins with the "Opening," uttered by the Sheikha in the presence of the spirit. This term implies power, manifested in terms of authority, knowledge, and wealth. It brings a devotee to the same status as other Zar possessors. Power, which varies from one spirit to another, is usually obtained through a dream or through the opening which is given by the spirits within the Zar ceremonies. The Beshir spirit, from the Habash group, shapes his openings in medical terms. The devotee who is possessed by Beshir will become a healer. Instruction and knowledge are transmitted through dreams. Some openings give the devotee the knowledge of *Wad'i* (sea shells). By knowing how to practice the *Wad'i* signs, the devotee can read the future and tell secrets. The person who asks for a job will be informed of details of his future position. If the devotee demonstrates skill, people may come from abroad and pay an homage of money called *al-Bayad* to the devotee, resulting in the devotee moving to a higher economic status. People believe that Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, paid *al-Bayad* to her father when he protected her son with Quranic verses; their belief legitimizes their gifts given as prayers, since otherwise Islam does not permit seeking cures from supernatural forces. The successful devotee shows strong faith, receives more power, and is elevated to a higher status by becoming a Sheikha. The Sheikha status is usually acquired by a demonstration of knowledge, skill, and creativity, and is achieved by only a few devotees.

The Maintenance of Power

The devotee who obtains power through Zar rituals must maintain this power; otherwise the devotee will endanger herself, becoming vulnerable to another attack by spirits. Although I have identified only the positive side of the spirits, they have a dual role manifested in the good and bad aspects of their behavior. Therefore, the devotee must fulfill all the spirit demands: (1) The devotee must take care of her personal appearance; (2) the devotee's purification and cleanliness are required for spirit contact; (3) the devotee must show her beauty and present a clean house; (4) the devotee must distance herself from sadness and anger; (5) the devotee is forbidden to attend funerals or to see corpses because death contrasts with the nature of these spirits who love beauty and fun; and (6) the devotee's spouse, or her family if she is not married, must fulfill the demands of the spirit. If any of these stipulations are broken, the devotee will be punished. Punishment usually takes the form of sickness, loss

of wealth, marital problems, and problems with other family members. The devotee who neglects her beauty will be punished by the spirits. Miscarriages and bleeding are the way in which the spirit Luliyya shows her animosity. In this situation, the devotee's power will cause problems that might limit her ability to perform ordinary tasks with competence. Accordingly, the situation must be corrected by conducting Yomiyya, a celebration with the spirit to ask for forgiveness. Presenting beauty on a daily basis is the means by which the devotee will appease the spirits, and consequently maintain power. Therefore, taking care of one's beauty is essential in sustaining the devotee's power. Simon Messing states that "[In Ethiopia] some male connoisseurs of female beauty claim that a woman's glowing charms leave her when her protective Zar leaves her" (1985:304). That is, when the devotee neglects her beauty, the Zar is no longer interested in her. Subsequently her power will be threatened. Thus, the devotee's care of her beauty is an essential factor in maintaining power. Attending Zar rituals conducted for other people is recommended for the devotee to engage herself completely with the spirits. Presenting her beauty by dressing in fine clothes and putting on jewelry and protective objects is required to appease the spirits. Dancing is the means through which the spirit's joy and happiness reaches its climax. This explains why audience participation is essential to Zar ritual performance. Every effort that can make the celebration beautiful and fun will elevate the devotee's status and maintain her power.

Conclusion

The way the Sudanese conceptualize and perceive their worldview, the universe, and how it operates is crucial in Sudanese life. The way they perceive Islam has the capacity to accommodate and legitimize different deeply rooted elements of Sudanese culture. Spirit possession is one of the cultural activities celebrated by the Sudanese. The data collected from this fieldwork suggests that the Zar cult is pre-Islamic; evidently, the rituals themselves accommodate traditions and customs contrary to Islam. Nonetheless, the Zar was syncretized into the Sudanese Muslim religious order, with jinns among the beings who were created by Allah. In addition to religious elements, the concept of beauty is an essential factor in analyzing and understanding the full meaning of the phenomenon and its relation with power. Beauty, while attracting the negative powers of evil, has the potential to be harnessed through spirit possession into a powerful force which can be turned in favor of the devotee. The interaction between the devotee and the spirit galvanizes beauty with protection from evil elements. The guarding of beauty is the beginning and end of this ongoing process. The power of the devotee grows through this maintenance of beauty in rituals that have been endowed through

traditional thought with religious significance. Although spirits protect the devotee, any negligence of her own beauty will result in punishment, thereby negatively affecting the devotee's power.

Some scholars who have studied spirit possession in Sudan attribute its existence to social factors. The data presented here, which was collected from the field, demonstrates that although some devotees have never experienced any psychological or sociological disorders, they have still been possessed by spirits. An explanation of this can only be found through knowing people's thought about spirit possession and its associated contextual factors.

It is not our interpretations that explain this cultural phenomenon, but rather the people who practice the rituals; they give the rituals a full meaning according to their own conceptualizations.

Notes

1 For more about Sheikh Muhammad, see Hurreiz 1991.

2 In the Sudanese perception of color referring to human beings, "black" and "white" do not exist. Instead, they use "blue" to identify black and "red" to identify white.

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