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They don’t have to dance any more for an audience, but they will accompany a young defunto when that pleases them, often driven by the influence of alcohol.

2 Each woman has her own dead man to be initiated. The choice of her defunto is made by the priestess (Okinza) and the defunto-priest (Ovare). It happens in the forest, when the girl is possessed for the first time. The defunto man that possesses her will talk or dance in such a way that he’ll be recognized and individually identified by the priestesses. At this point he will receive his initiatic name. In the following days, when presented to the village, there will be no longer any question of a girl being called Isabel, nor of a dead boy called Tempo, but of a defunto warrior named Ompani. The spirit of a dead man possesses only one woman, but if she dies before accomplishing his initiation, his spirit will stay in the forest to be taken by another girl. This maintains the system, since at times there aren’t enough souls for every woman to initiate. The male death rate is not high enough to allow each woman to have one dead man’s soul. At the initiation moment, priest and priestess may be in the embarrassing situation of not having enough dead males from which to choose, and one way to circumvent this deficiency is to recuperate the souls released upon an adult woman’s death. The opposite situation, where there would be too many dead men to be initiated and not enough women to be possessed, would not be demographically possible and certainly does not occur in times of peace.

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The Case of the Butcher’s Wife

Illness, Possession & Power in Central Sudan

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what possessed women portray is not the power of the powerful or the men’s dominion, but rather the whole spectacle of life with all its contradictions and problems (Kramer 1993: 114-15)

The following case study describes the course of action adopted by a Sudanese woman to deal with ongoing health problems, drawing on her own narrative to show how she became involved with the spirit possession activities known as zar. The account is based on taped interviews I made in 1981–2 and my field-notes from a zar-burei ceremony held in the town of Sennar, Central Sudan, in August 1981. This was never a large affair; at its most lavish, there were perhaps forty guests while for the most part, around twenty people were present. In many ways it was typical of such ceremonies held regularly in the Sudan as a way of staving off misfortune and ensuring well-being for the participants. At the same time, it was a unique occurrence, focusing on the needs and problems of one particular woman – Amna, the butcher’s wife.

Zar is a widespread phenomenon in northern Africa and the Middle East and has been particularly well-documented in the Sudan (Boddy 1988, 1989; Constantinides 1977, 1991; Kenyon 1991a, 1991b, 1995; Makris and al-Safi 1991; El-Nagar 1975, 1987; Zenkovsky 1950). The term zar refers to both a type of spirit and to various practices and rituals associated with those spirits; it also encompasses several different ‘ways’ or organized sets of practices. In Sennar, for example, two distinct types are recognized today: zar-burei and zar-tumbura. While they differ in ritual and organization, the belief in zar (albeit in contrasting types of spirits) is at the core of both groups. Zar spirits, often referred to as ‘the red wind’, are basically benign although they can bring disorder to the lives of people they actively possess and have been known to cause fatalities. They are also represented as foreigners rather than families, with distinctive dress, food, perfume and musical preferences. We are increasingly aware that they are part of a highly complex and elaborate system of knowledge which is both widespread and probably very old in Africa (Ranger 1993).

Not all people are involved with zar in the same way. Gender, age and residence are important variables in determining a person’s association with the spirits. Children learn about such things from an early age as they observe local rituals or hear adults analyse life’s crises in spiritual terms. While a certain knowledge about zar is thus shared by men and women, young and old, urban and rural, elaboration of
that knowledge into an organized system of activities is almost entirely in the hands of middle-aged women in the larger towns. These activities are further controlled by formally-trained female leaders who are past child-bearing age, known in Sen-

nar as al-umiyat (singing, umiyat). The fact that zar organization is predominantly female has been interpreted as evidence that it is a deprivation cult (after Lewis 1971, 1986) in the sense that 'women and other depressed categories exert mystical pressures on their superiors in circumstances of deprivation and frustration when few other sanctions are available to them' (Lewis 1986: 39). Such cults are further described as 'peripheral' because not only do they 'not embody the main moral code of the societies in which they occur', but also in such societies 'women are in fact treated as peripheral creatures' (Lewis 1986: 42). More recent studies have tried to avoid this androcentric bias and have seen zar rather as a different perspective or 'way of knowing' (after Lambek 1993), as well as an alternative formulation of social and spiritual relations that is commonly described for Central Sudanese Islamic society. It is certainly the latter approach that is suggested in the butcher's wife's own narrative, as she describes the different choices available to her in dealing with her affliction, the wide-ranging help and support she receives from family and friends in the long healing process, and the complexities of the therapeutic ritual of zar possession in which this culminates.

Those who participate in zar are drawn from the full spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds, including the poor and illiterate as well as people of substance. Initial involvement often comes through misfortune or illness though it may later be diagnosed as an inherited condition. When a problem occurs, Sudanese feel they have a range of options to resort to, of which zar is but one. Biomedicine, Islamic healing, and different traditional healers and home remedies often overlap in the pluralistic medical system of the Sudan, and the choice of one strategy over another, or the concurrent use of several strategies, is not readily apparent. Individuals' choices are usually determined less by their own preferences and resources than by those of people close to them: their family, neighbours and friends. As will be clear below, this resource group (what Janzen 1978 refers to as the 'therapy-managing group') is a major factor in making decisions during the therapeutic process, both in the early stages of the disorder and as the course of treatment proceeds. Furthermore this process is largely managed by women. It is striking that while men may attempt to solve their own difficulties, women generally assume responsibility for their close kin as well as themselves (Kenyon 1991a: 163ff). Assisted by their various support networks, they are adept at exploring the available possibilities. When accepting treatment through a male-dominated system (such as biomedicine or Islamic healing), they may temporarily surrender control of the process to a husband or brother, but their mothers and sisters are still likely to be checking out other options, ready to step in if necessary. They may also be adopting parallel courses of action as a safeguard, since they view all systems of curing as relatively equal but different. If knowledge is power, then women in this part of the world possess distinct advantages; they have access to multiple domains of knowledge, being less bound by the constraints of hegemonic ideology than many men.

Therapeutic choices are ongoing. Even when dealing with the same problem, an individual and her support group continue to look for the best alternative as they implement a course of action. For most participants, zar possession provides only one set of answers to a particular circumstance; and even for the most committed,
Amna, the butcher’s wife: affliction and possession

I first met Amna, the butcher’s wife, through her teenage daughters, Asha and Selma; the latter was a student in the local secondary school and they were both friends of my neighbour’s daughter. They talked lovingly of their mother, who was obviously the focus of their home, and proudly took me there to meet her. She beamed with pride at them too, and told me she had seven children altogether, although the house seemed to be bursting with more. Later I learned that she had ten surviving children but was afraid that if she had told me the exact number she would have upset either the ‘evil eye’ or the government. The ‘evil eye’ would fall on her or one of the children because of their abundant good fortune, while the government was believed to be enforcing a policy of sterilization for women with more than seven surviving children. Amna lived in dread of being found out by either secular or supernatural authorities simply because she thought that she was more fortunate, more blessed, than any one individual ought to be.

As I got to know her better I realized that Amna lived in dread of many things and was in a constant state of nervous excitement. She was a small, gaunt woman in her early forties, with a high pitched voice and a way of wringing her hands as she talked. When I first met her, she already looked frail. Her face was shrunken and her cheek bones stood out below large, protruding eyes. Her family was concerned about her health and had taken her to several western-trained doctors, one of whom had suggested that she had a toxic goitre. She rejected that diagnosis and went into a fit of depression, muttering that she knew she was going to die and that her family should just leave her to do so. When she continued to deteriorate, her children persuaded her to go back to the doctor; but she claimed that on the second visit, he changed his diagnosis. He told her she did not have a goitre at all, that her problems were all caused by ‘nerves’ and she should pull herself together.

Amna had not always been ill or thin. When she was young, she said, she had been plump and beautiful. Indeed Asha and Selma were both very attractive young women and it was easy to see what their mother must once have been like. She had been born in the north of Sudan to the Shygiya people and many of her family still lived around Atbara. She was just thirteen years old when she was married to Ahmad, who was about ten years older, a close maternal relative through his father he belonged to the Danagla people. They had been happily married for over thirty years, and he was most concerned about her poor health.

Amna had a conservative upbringing. Her paternal grandfather was a ‘hard’ man, who believed that girls should not leave the house and would not let any of them go to school, even Quranic school. She never learned to read or write, not unusual for a woman of her age but it leaves her feeling sad, especially since her own daughters did well at school. Her brothers, meanwhile, were all educated and were successful businessmen. One was working in Saudi Arabia when we met.

Her husband trained as a butcher like his father and soon after their marriage came to Sennar to seek his fortune in the main market. He was moderately successful though Amna commented that their income never seemed enough. Their oldest son also trained as a butcher and worked with his father. Their eldest daughter, Asha, left school after the intermediate level to care for her mother, who was already
beginning to suffer health problems. Asha had started a nursery school in the vacant site next to their home and cherished ambitions of a teaching career. Except for the youngest, all the other children were in school at the time of these events.

In moving to Sennar, Amna and Ahmed left all their relatives in the north, something Amna still found difficult. They settled on the outskirts of town where for a modest sum they purchased a house site. Twenty-five years later they were the proud owners of a large home, with two brick living rooms, a detached bathroom area, a grass hut which served as the kitchen and an adjacent lean-to [nakaba] where the women spent most of their time. Their courtyard, in which they grew fruit and vegetables and kept a few livestock, was one of the more spacious in the area; chickens ran freely round the house and yard, and goats and sheep grazed under the trees.

Amna’s neighbours were concerned about her declining health. She was a warm-hearted individual, always ready to help others despite her very real health problems. If guests arrived in the neighbourhood, she was the first to send over a dish of food. She was also modest and self-effacing, listening with sympathy and encouragement to the difficulties of others. Her own troubles started just before she became pregnant with her last child. She described her condition as ‘... a beating in my stomach, headaches, pains, cramps and vomiting ... vomiting until I fainted,’ so severe that she consulted a faki. Her oldest daughter went to him on her mother’s behalf and he declared that someone had put the ‘evil eye’ on her. Amna recalled:

He sent a mishaya and I drank it and vomited. After that I slept till the morning. He told them to bring me to him. I said I could only go if they carried me. I couldn’t even go to the toilet alone; they had to bring the chamber pot to me. I said to him, I can’t come … and so I was ill for a year, unable to go out or visit him. Then he died ...

Amna was still not well but soon after, her mother was taken ill and sent for. Amna did not hesitate to go north, though the travelling was difficult. Happily, her mother recovered, and while she was resting in her home village, Amna tried again to find treatment for her own problem; I used to be very strong, like a horse, but had become very thin. We have a shaikhi in our village.

I went to see him and he gave me medicine and said it would strengthen my nerves. It did not do me any good. I kept drinking the medicine and vomiting. Then they said they wanted to do the zar. When my mother saw me she had said ‘You have to beat and open the Box.’ You have zar. So they opened the Box for me there and beat me a yunuita [one-day ceremony]. Then I became better. We beat the zar for one day and the next day I became well. I was able to come from my mother’s home. Our journey was very difficult ... but after the zar I was very fit.

By the time she returned to Sennar, Amna was also heavily pregnant. She had believed she was too old at 39 to conceive again; her youngest child was already five years old and Amna had assumed her child-bearing days were over. Both pregnancy and delivery were difficult:

I had to go to the doctor at the hospital. Dr. H. When I first went to him, my stomach was very small. I thought I had a fibroid but he said, ‘No, no, no, you have a child but you are very anemic. It is a child, but it is not moving because of your blood. It is just hiding. You are thin and weak, you have no blood. It does not move about in your stomach. You will have to deliver it in the hospital.’ When I was ready, I went and they gave me drips and injections and after that the doctors came and I gave birth to her. Before that I used to deliver my babies very quickly ... The baby was very, very small. Her head was tiny. I thought she would die, but look at her now! She is very fat. I never had any milk for her, though; she only had it from the bottle. I was fine in childbirth. It was when I got up from the lying-in that I became ill. Forty days after the birth I got up, really fat and well. My health had come back to me, I was beautiful. Then within three months, illness came to me once more. I had a terrible shock because my oldest son was admitted to hospital. He suddenly was taken ill with a fever and they took him straight to hospital and gave him stomach surgery. He was there for eight or nine days. He recovered, but I became sick instead.

Her earlier symptoms returned. She consulted all sorts of experts but was only confused by their conflicting advice:

I had been to different doctors and to a gynaecologist for my pregnancy. I had been to holy men. I even went to a very famous holy man in Khartoum, in Umm Beda. He just told me, ‘No, I can’t help you, your illness is one of the zar. You just have to beat [the drums] for it.’ He was a famous man, he knew everything, both a faki and a doctor. If the illness was not of zar, he told you which doctor to see. He knows all about every type of sickness and he could take you anywhere for treatment. He said to me ‘You have got al-jumur. You need to make a ceremony (karama) for them.’ Straight-away we said we will make a karama and we will beat for them.

Sara, one of Amna’s neighbours, was particularly concerned about her friend. It was she who had persuaded Amna to visit the famous faki in Umm Beda, a man from her home village, who she felt could convince Amna what her problem really was. She described the visit:

Amna hesitated. She did not want to waste money and said that it might not be zar and she might not be all right. Then we went to this man. He told us everything that was happening to her, everything that she felt in her body, the heartbeat, the disturbances in her body, vomiting, diarrhoea, leg aches, feeling scared, everything that hurt in her body he told her about. Maybe he spent an hour talking with her. After he finished he said, ‘Listen, you do not have any doctor’s illness. You don’t have a rash or a debilitating sickness or high blood pressure or diabetes. You don’t have anything in your body except the Red Wind. This is the dastur. These people have taken over your nerves and your heart.’ He told her that the shakings and disturbances were from them and said ‘Maybe you have not held a karama for them, they only want a karama from you. After you do this, after the seven days, they will leave you alone and you will become well.’ So she agreed ... But she had two doubts in her heart. She thought maybe this is not the dastur and she would waste all this money and then find that it is not the dastur; and maybe she would not recover. But this man had told her, ‘You do not have anything but the dastur so go straight away and beat for them.’

On her return from Umm Beda, Amna started to see the leader, al-umiyia, of the local zar group on a regular basis.

I had already been to the umiyia; when I was very ill they had taken me there. Really they had to lead me there. They had opened the tin Box for me and I had paid LS3. They told me to bring pigeons and a box of cigarettes and they wanted a bottle of liquor (arajo), so I gave them money to buy it. Then they opened the Box again and said ‘Bring the pigeons.’ I brought the pigeons and they cleansed me. I had a silver ring on my finger and they cleansed that too. They said ‘That’s it!’ I came home that night and slept and then they told me it was zar. I said ‘no, no, it is not zar.’

Amna believes she caught, rather than inherited, zar:

My mother herself does not have zar. In the north we do not know the zar like they have here. We do not have cigarettes or arajo; we only beat the dalaka [tambourine drum], that’s all. Here they smoke and drink and have no shame ... She thinks she knows the occasion when she was affected:

This was the case. I got it from a woman over there [the other side of town] who had the zar
The holy man in Umam Baha had convinced her that she should try to secure a cure through the zar. Anna and her family began to save for a zar ceremony as the umma advised. Although they took time to stretch their savings, the family managed to raise enough money for the ceremony.

The ceremony began with the umma and her husband being driven to the temple. They were accompanied by a group of relatives and friends, and the ceremony lasted for several days. It was a time of great faith and spirituality, as the family sought to bring their loved one back to health.

Anna's condition improved significantly after the ceremony, and she was able to resume her daily activities. Her family was overjoyed with the results, and they thanked the umma and her husband for their efforts.

The ceremony was a turning point in Anna's life, and she was able to return home to her family. The experience taught her the importance of faith and spirituality in overcoming difficult times.

The experience also strengthened her bond with her family, and she was grateful for their support throughout the process. Anna was determined to continue following the path of faith and spirituality, and she looked forward to the future with hope and optimism.
of the evening, bowls of mutton stew later. Many women became possessed by Bashir, the only spirit to descend and in whose honour the sacrifice had been made. When the umiyya was possessed she danced alone in the centre of the courtyard with the other women encircling her, clapping with awe, especially when she pulled Amna into the circle with her. However, there was also a lot more quarrelling, especially between the umiyya and some of her assistants, and it was not always clear who was possessed. The assistants kept demanding more refreshments and cigarettes, blaming the umiyya when they were not available. There were obviously dramas within dramas.

On the final day of the ceremony, drumming began early, well before dawn. Fewer women attended and the subdued atmosphere was in sharp contrast to the near frenzy of the previous evening. Amna, looking very demure, was wrapped in a firta garmasis, the women's brightly coloured ceremonial cloth which indicated that part of this evening's events was in honour of the female spirit Luluiya, sister of Bashir. Activities began with the highlight of the whole karama when the umiyya carried out a large metal bowl holding the head of the sacrificed sheep, and performed the ritual of 'the Opening of the Head'. With drums pounding, Amna knelt before her. The sheep's head was held aloft and the umiyya poured a glass of water into its mouth, as if to welcome the guest. Later the cooked meat was stripped off the head and passed around for those brave enough to eat, which they did with great reverence. Refreshments for Luluiya – Pepsi, candles, sweet beans and cookies – were shared and then, rather suddenly, Luluiya left. A different beat, another style of dancing, signalled the reappearance of the spirit Josay, as women he possessed strode round with exaggerated gestures, toying with spears. Josay 'played' for a while, left and finally Bashir returned for the rest of the evening. By this time Amna was completely exhausted. She had to be helped to stand and to dance; but she again was possessed by each of the spirits in turn.

The ceremony thus ended. Life began to get back to normal for most of us, though Amna was confined to her room for four more days, tended only by the umiyya. The final scene of the karama was played out a week later in a procession, asisara, to the banks of the Blue Nile. The family rented a public car to take ten women, drummers, coffee cups and pots, cooking stoves [kanaf], and clothes to the river. There at the river's edge the umiyya beat the drums to summon the spirits to Amna for the last time.

Amna recounted the events:

Ah! That day at the river! Here at home, we had made lugna [sorghum porridge], mulah roh [sour milk stew], sharma [meat sauce], we had bought sweets and had twelve cups and twelve finjan. Then before we went to the river we made coffee, just like the first day of the zar. They poured out the tea and coffee into the twelve cups and twelve finjan and served the people inside and outside the house. Rabba the umiyya had come and bathed herself. She brought the water, washed my hair for me and told me to wash myself. Then she took me to the river. All the way to the river, the women were singing. Rabba herself was singing...

They had dressed me up with beads ... plaited cowrie shells into my hair and then covered me up. I couldn't see till we got to the river, I was so covered up. There I asked them which way I should go. They said you have to go into the water. When I saw the spray and foam from that dam, well ... I covered my face and Zachara held me. I said 'Never No, no, no, leave me alone.' Water from the dam was coming on high. I washed my face with it. They kept pushing me to go in and I said to Rabba she should. She just said 'Do you think I don't have any children?' I felt dizzy, all the women were dizzy ... After that, they brought the pigeons. They threw them
at the water, but the pigeons returned to us, they came back from the water. Rabha took them and picked them up and killed them. Then she filled a plate with blood and sweets and beans and dropped it all into the river. She washed the plate.

They sang for Hakinhasha. They sang and dressed for all of them [the spirits], but for Hakinhasha they walked around the garden. There he came to us. The girls had brought the plates and fed us stews and sweets and cream, caramel, and a box of cigarettes. We ate and smoked and then we were ready to go.

After that I felt fine. Thanks be to God, I felt calm and relaxed.

I did not see Amna for several weeks, but heard that she had recovered quickly after the trip to the river. When I finally met her I expected a more dramatic improvement. At first glance, she looked as frail as ever, but she was cheerful and confident that she would fully recover.

Thanks be to God, I am much better. Before that zar, I could not sleep at night. My eyes used to swell and hurt me. Now I sleep. Since I beat that zar, I take my bed outside to the courtyard and sleep till morning. Thanks be to God.

Of the zar practitioners in Sennar, on the other hand, she felt more than a little disillusioned:

That zar of theirs is just money. Money! Altogether that zar cost me too much money. Probably 15,000 in all. ... That zar really needs a lot of money. And now, every time there is a maidan they send for us. ... Are these women playing? We just run away from them. Really, this zar, it is bring this and bring that and drink this, things which I know nothing about.

Discussion

Several themes emerge from this detailed description of one woman’s encounter with zar. It reminds us of the ‘world of ethnographic things’, the sights, sounds, smells and tastes (after Stoller 1989: 5), symbols which are fundamental to understanding the many dimensions of such ritual events. Besides detailing the decline of Amna’s health and the course of a single zar ritual, it illustrates indigenous attitudes to health and sickness; the processes of different curing systems and the decisions associated with choosing one over the other; and the richness of belief and practice associated with the system known as zar. In addition it offers insight into the contradictions and complexities of ideas about a woman’s individual identity, autonomy and power in relation to possession by spirits. What is lacking in this account, however, is any indication that the butcher’s wife and her friends are, or regard themselves to be, a ‘depressed category’, ‘deprived’ or ‘frustrated’; that they are trying to exert any type of ‘mystical pressure’ on either spirits or humans; that they regard anyone, either male or female, spirit or human, as their ‘superiors’, or that they feel they have limited resources at their disposal (after Lewis 1986). On the contrary, Amna’s own narrative makes clear that while she saw herself as a sick woman she attributed this mainly to her own abundant good fortune, and had a range of options to deal with her problems, which she and her supporting kin and friends carefully weighed up in an ongoing fashion. Furthermore the description of the culminating ceremony shows that, while fraught with tensions, it is a complex and empowering event for many women, and one which is redolent with symbolism reinforcing female power and control in the wider social world.

The Case of the Butcher’s Wife

Power, like possession, comes in diverse forms. It is not simply coercion or dominance, and is certainly far more than a reflection of political ideology or hegemony (as Errington 1990, after Anderson 1972, showed so effectively for Southeast Asia). In order to appreciate the nature of this form of empowerment we need to understand how power is conceived of in context (cf. Giles 1987); otherwise we fail to understand why possession offers such a ‘powerful’ alternative in a wide range of situations. In this case study we are dealing with at least two understandings of power. First, there are the social and cultural inequalities which to some extent reflect the wider society. These are based on age as well as gender, but also include more specialized levels of knowledge and ability. Within zar society, there are distinct hierarchies based on experience within the organization as well as in relation to the spirits themselves and these are largely independent of secular society. Second, and from an emic perspective more significantly, zar possession, like that of Islamic trance such as in zikr, carries an electrifying potency. Once a spirit ‘comes down’ and actively possesses a person, she is felt to be surrounded by an aura of spiritual energy which should not be breached. No one should touch a possessed individual, for physical contact with the spirit domain is highly dangerous. This potent ‘charge’ is most highly developed by the umiya, who is in more or less constant contact with this spirit domain; but even a relative sceptic like Amna is infused with an energy or strength to make a valiant if not total recovery, and to regain some control over her physical well-being.

All the participants in this ceremony were touched by this energy and the range of voices they express through their participation is one of the strongest indications of the empowerment such activities bring. Voice in itself is a confirmation of power: it is the silenced who lack the means to assert their autonomy and are more properly deprived. On this occasion a multitude of voices is clamouring to be heard, reflecting differences and inequalities within the possession state but none are helpless. Indeed the boundaries between ‘hegemonic’ and ‘counter-hegemonic’ discourses are often blurred in individuals’ own words. In Sennar no less than elsewhere, social relationships do not fall into neatly drawn categories; and in relation to the spirits as well as in relations mediated through the spirits, significant and often unpredictable dynamics are evident.

This becomes clearer as we look at the loudest voices being expressed: those of the butcher’s wife and the umiya. What is striking, as we follow Amna through the course of her illness and her evolving relations with the spirit world, is how her relationship with the spirits was largely mediated by or through her social relationships. She herself retained a certain scepticism throughout the process as well as a strong awareness of self. For example, she always tried to be a ‘good Muslim’ in the traditional/orthodox sense and was concerned that involvement in zar was contrary to Islamic tenets. All those she consulted, friends, relatives and even religious figures, reassured her on this point but throughout the ceremony we see her and her support group finding their own accommodations so that their perceptions of what it means to be a ‘good Muslim’ remain intact. It was important that prayer mats be laid out at the proper times during the ceremony and that her submission to Islam should be visible. Zar activities invariably cease briefly when the Islamic call to prayer is heard in Sennar, in this way reinforcing a spatial and temporal separation of the two domains of knowledge. The extent to which they can overlap on any occasion varies enormously; in this case, Amna and her family took the lead in
infusing her experiences in *zar* with public Islamic submission. Furthermore, they also drew boundaries between their family life and the domain of *zar*, as they made sure that most of the formal activities were held in the empty site next door, space that they already used but which did not belong to them. The ceremony inevitably spilled over into Anna’s own courtyard and kitchen, where much of the preparation occurred, but Anna’s efforts to contain the boundaries of the spirits in both religious and domestic terms are significant commentaries on her own sense of self and autonomy.

Anna did indeed have real problems and did not enter her relationship with the spirits from a position of strength. She became involved with *zar* for several reasons, most notable of which were serious physical symptoms. She lived in dread of all sorts of things; she was constantly told she was suffering from ‘her nerves’, and seemed to be physically fading away. Pregnancy was a contributing factor although not the precipitating cause and it is worth noting that Anna’s problem was excessive fecundity rather than infertility. Furthermore, she, like her neighbours, was upset by rumours that women were being routinely sterilized in hospital if they give birth to more than seven children. She was less afraid of the fact that she could have no more children – she really did feel God had been more than generous to her – than she was of surgery. This type of medical procedure is far too drastic a measure for a condition which she knew would be taken care of naturally in a short time. ‘Cutting out her stomach’ (which is how she always described it) seemed a totally alien and intrusive response to what she saw as a purely natural state.

Physical problems were compounded by social and family difficulties. The illness of her mother and the fact that her relatives lived so far away were ongoing sources of stress. Her youngest child was difficult; small and thin, incredibly highly strung. The illness of her son (for which he actually had stomach surgery, an interesting recurrence of this theme) caused a very real setback from which she was not able to recover although he appears to have made a quick return to health. Money was an ongoing problem; there was never enough to meet the costs of schooling, taxes and other necessities. The strenuous demands of her social networks, in both Sennar and the north, added to Anna’s general fatigue. The death of her close friend, the widow Wakil, and concern for her orphaned children were final straws in what can be seen as a steady process of decline.

However, Anna was not allowed to decline alone. What is striking about her case is the strength of her support group, and the various roles each person played in facilitating the therapeutic process: her mother, friends such as the widow Sara, midwife Zachara, teacher Munira and the neighbours who attended daily to help out as needed. Sara especially was torn between her sense of social propriety and anxieties concerning potential menace from the spirits, as she urged Anna’s daughters to cook more food for the unexpected guests, and at the same time tried to make sure that the family was properly prepared for this encounter with the spiritual domain. When she took the drum on the night of the storm to ensure the ceremony continued, she was fearful the spirits would be disturbed by one of two things: on the one hand they might be offended by contact from someone not ritually qualified, on the other they would be angry at an abrupt halt to the proceedings. Her actions (like those of Zachara) showed courage and presence of mind; they also highlighted the dangers felt to surround any contact with the spiritual world.

These were expressed even more dramatically in the mercurial behaviour of the *umiyas*. Often unreliable in her relationships in the human domain, she was held to be fulfilling in her control of the spirits and the sometimes extravagant demands they made, even through her. The difficulties she encountered in trying to hold a curing ceremony for Anna suggested to many guests that she was callous and irresponsible. Her clients however were aware that she was constantly wrestling with volatile spirits and the unpredictable ways they asserted themselves against any form of human control or manipulation. For long periods she sat taciturnly by, oblivious to rising tensions around her, as when bad weather held up the *karana*. Rubbing down her equipment with the special oils of *zar*, warming the silent drums, she was already engaged in holding back the spirits. Nobody looked to her for guidance on this occasion; indeed she herself rarely spoke. She responded to the spirits and to the demands that they laid on her and those who were reached through her. The fact that these demands were often unreasonable in terms of human social conventions only heightened the powers she was felt to command.

The *umiyas’* main assistants, equally demanding, also added significant voice to the occasion through both their presence and their absence. Both women shared the *umiyas’* potency but lacked her total commitment to the spirits. Each had her own separate relationships with the *zar*, which are touched on only lightly here. The *umiyas’* mother was the main drummer and held great status within the circle of *zar* devotees, even though she herself was rarely possessed. Usually a sweet old lady, in the company of spirits she could be highly unpleasant to human guests. Her second daughter, the *umiyas’* younger sister, was the other main assistant. Like her mother, she also claimed to have no personal relations with *zar*, but because of her proximity to the house of *zar* she was felt to have special powers in relation to the spirits. She expressed this by repeatedly taunting the spirits (in or through the possessed), adopting behaviour regarded as suitable only for spirits (aggressive ‘manly’, rude) behaviour) and addressing the spirits directly in this way. Her own life style was also unconventional: she was unmarried and had a child, she worked in the market, she was loud and unrestrained. In all this she was regarded as running a narrow line between danger from the spirits on the one hand and social ostracism on the other.

Each of these voices is engaged in communicating not only with each other but also with the spirits. In addition to human interactions, the *karana* is a forum for the spirits themselves, their various sounds and presence. Although in the opening ritual the ‘whole assembly of spirits’ was summoned by drum-beats and was thus regarded as attending briefly, Anna’s ceremony was dominated by the few individual spirits who were believed to be troubling her and in whose honour the *karana* was held as a major step towards conciliation. The aloof, professional silence of Hakinbasha contrasts with the rough and demanding (but more popular) tones of Bashir and (to a lesser extent) of Josay, or with the gentler and less noisy demands of Luliyah. Each of these spirits has a history, a ritualized interpretation which articulates public and individual, national and local events in discourses which are simultaneously widely shared and yet unique. All four spirits are well-known throughout the Sudan today, and the contours of their individuality or ‘spirituality’ are sharply drawn. However, there is always a hint of unpredictability. The way in which they might interact with Anna, in Anna, left an element of suspense which heightened the emotions throughout the ceremony. No two manifestations of a spirit are ever the same; and particularly those *zar* described as new spirits, the
Ethiopian spirits Bashar and his sister Luliana are said to have been possessed of individual and unique characteristics. The behavior is a well-known phenomenon in Ethiopia, a country with a rich tradition of spiritualism. The belief in spirits is deeply ingrained in the culture and is often associated with healing and communal rituals. The possession of spirits is also considered a form of communication with the spiritual world, and it is believed that these spirits can provide guidance and wisdom.

The possession of spirits is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, involving cultural, social, and religious elements. It is not uncommon for people to seek the help of a spiritual leader or a group of followers to perform rituals and ceremonies to facilitate the possession. These rituals often involve music, dance, and chanting, and they are designed to create a trance-like state in which the individual becomes more open to the influence of the spirits.

The possession of spirits is not limited to Ethiopia; it is also observed in other parts of Africa and in other cultures around the world. In some cases, possession rituals are performed to treat physical or mental illness, while in others, they are seen as a way to seek guidance or to connect with the spiritual realm. The beliefs and practices surrounding possession rituals vary widely, reflecting the unique cultural and historical contexts in which they are observed.
17 Her initial reluctance to accept this diagnosis is typical. Zar is widely regarded as un-Islamic, and indeed since the Islamization policy of the present government was imposed, zar activities have been officially banned.

18 i.e., was possessed by a zar spirit.

19 The hats were worn by colonial officials. In fact they are Egyptian (and thus Pharaonic) rather than Khuwajat dress, but this sort of distinction is not always important in zar performance.

20 In the Sudan, the term Chair (Kursi) refers to the formal seven-day ceremony, and the derivation of the term has provoked some interesting hypotheses (in Kenyon 1991a). The term recurs in other types of spirit possessions, though with differing usages. For example, in Swahili possession the human hosting the ceremony is the Chair of the spirit (Giles 1987: 241); and in Madagascar there are colonial trobna spirits that sit in armchairs and are called Armchair Spirits (Sharp, personal communication).

21 The same term is used for any type of thanksgiving event.

22 At the time, this was worth approximately $100, more than double what the butcher earned in a month.

23 We learned later that they had put on an unexpected karama for a nephew who had died recently in the east.

24 This term, which is used in other contexts to describe women’s household equipment (Kenyon 1991a: 186, 249), refers to the equipment used in zar.

25 Until a woman has offered an animal sacrifice to zar spirits in a formal ceremony, she is not able to stand during actual possession, an example of the very tangible boundaries that are drawn between different types of possession.

26 Or Jozay, as Boddy (1989) refers to him. He, like each of the spirits possessing Amna, is found in zar throughout Northern and Central Sudan.

27 This is the same term used for the procession in a wedding or naming ceremony when a trip may also be taken to the river.

28 The exception to this statement is the fact that some spirits (notably the Ethiopians) like to be welcomed in informal contexts with a special handshake. However, any further physical contact with them is also avoided.

29 I wish to acknowledge the insight of Lesley Sharp in articulating this point.

30 When Amna felt that she was too old to have another child, she was reckoning her age in sociological rather than biological terms. Thirty-nine is not an uncommon age to have a child in Sudan. However, several of Amna’s children are already old enough to be parents themselves, although in fact none of them are yet married; it is this fact which makes her embarrassed by her continuing fecundity.

31 I was never able to authenticate this rumour, which was widely believed throughout Sennar. I also never met a woman who was actually deprived of having more children; they simply concealed the number of children they had in any official documents.

32 Comaroff (1985: 182) talks of a rejection of the categories of the cultural scheme in which healing was purely a matter of rational technical intervention, the repair of the body physical alone. This rejection is explicit in Amna’s double experience of stomach surgery.

33 She claimed to have little personal experience with the spirits. However, she had been married to a great leader (sajjak) in tumbura zar, had spent most of her life in the household of her mother-in-law, the ‘Grandmother of Sennar zar‘ (Kenyon 1991b), and was locally regarded as one of the most knowledgeable individuals within zar.

34 For example, when the spirit Bashir arrived towards the end of the second evening and several women stood up to dance immediately, one had hard, wide, unblinking staring eyes which caused great amusement. The onlookers laughed, mocking the spirit. ‘What is this?‘, they asked. ‘Does Bashir look like this now?‘ as they copied the staring eyes and the vacant expression of the possessed woman and tried to provoke the spirit. The possessed woman danced on, apparently unaware of the comments, and Bashir also failed to respond, though on other occasions this could easily precipitate some sort of dramatic outburst from him.

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References

Susan M. Kenyon


IV

Spirit Possession
as Performative Ethnography
& History 'from below'