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THE ZAR REVISITED

by Me'ira - The Joyful Dancer

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PT I: History of the Zar

Despite the fact that the Zar, which is the trance ceremony of North Africa and the middle east is technically prohibited by Islam, it continues to be an essential part of these cultures. Since I've been fortunate to find some new information on the Zar, I wanted to take another look at this phenomenon.

The Zar is best described as a "healing cult" which uses drumming and dancing in its ceremonies. It also functions as a sharing of knowledge and charitable society among the women of these very patriarchal cultures. Most leaders of Zar are women, and most participants are women. Many writers have noted that while the majority of the possessing spirits are male, those possessed are generally female. This is not to say that the men do not contribute to zar ceremonies: they may help with drumming, the slaughter of ritual animals, or may themselves be a husband or relative required to make offerings to the possessing spirit. In fact, it is perhaps an unfortunate trend that in cultures where the zar becomes more visible, there is more of a tendency for men to co-opt the ceremonies, and for men to become zar leaders.

Susan Kenyon notes that there has actually been a proliferation of cult groups in the Republic of Sudan, and a dramatic increase in the types of demands made of the cult. She attributes this in part to a poor economic situation which encourages men to go outside of the country for work, leaving women as de facto heads of households, with all the resulting stresses.

The Zar ceremonies were well-established in the Sudan by the 1820's. They were outlawed by Shari'a law in 1983, but instead of decreasing the ceremonies actually appear to have increased. These ceremonies provide a unique form of relief to women in strict patriarchal societies. Islam itself has always believed in the existence of "spirits", which it calls "jinn". In addition, the zar has been officially banned in the Sudan since 1992, but the drums still beat on - possibly, Kenyon says, because of the support of the wives of influential men.

Zar, in the sense of possession, is usually, though not exclusively, inherited. It is also contagious and may strike at any time. Diriye Abdullahi, a native of Somalia, says that the zar is basically a dance of spirits, or a religious dance - kind of leftover from the old African deities, a variant of what we describe in the west as "voodoo". The old African deities were headed by two figures; Azuzar (the male, assoc. with Osiris) and Ausitu (the female, known in the west as Isis). Ausitu (or Aysitu in Somalia) is still celebrated and

given offerings by pregnant women so that she will provide them with a safe birth. He describes it as a ritual dance which is mostly observed by women, especially older women. This corresponds to the practice of older African religions, in which older women were the priestesses. He maintains that younger women, especially unmarried women, are not generally thought to be "worthy of a visit by the spirit of Zar, who chooses domicile or residence in the person who is his choice."

Diriye did not think it sacrilegious for adults to dance the zar, even if not possessed. In Egypt, he adds, it is mostly danced by the people who live in villages southern areas which were least exposed to the constant invaders that came over the centuries from Greece, Rome, and the Middle East, culminating in the Muslim Arabs. He adds that the largest number of practitioners are today found in the Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia - places which have traditions which have disappeared today in Egypt. The zar today is practiced more as a relaxation and as spiritual healing for stressed or troubled persons. The sacrificial animal may or may not be a part of this modern ceremony.

Part II: What a Zar ceremony involves ..

"Each woman moved to the pulse of the drum The sick woman's movement increased in intensity and speed, her eyes half closed, she appeared totally oblivious of her surroundings, abandoning herself completely to the dance. Her movements flowed freely from the inside out, from her torso to her limbs, gaining strength and speed as she came full circle around the imposing altar to where the helpers were... till finally, she threw her arms up and was about to fall, but the Kodia guided her to the floor..."

-From a description of an Egyptian Zar ceremony

"Smoking, wanton dancing, flailing about, burping and hiccuping, drinking blood and alcohol, wearing male clothing, publicly threatening men with swords, speaking loudly lacking due regard for etiquette, these are hardly the behaviors of Hofriyati women for whom dignity and propriety are leading concerns. But in the context of a Zar they are common and expected."

The drama of a zar ceremony quickly catches our imagination, but it's important to remember that it works because it functions within a specific cultural setting, with very specific requirements. As a cult, the Zar groups have a leader and members are expected to attend sessions regularly. There may be both public and private zar rituals; in a private ritual only members of the immediate family may be involved.

The leader may be called "Kodia" (Egypt), a Shaykha (N. Sudan) or an "Umiya" (N. Sudan) depending upon the region. The leader is herself possessed. She has come to terms with her "Jinn" or spirit and is therefore able to help others. Heredity is considered an important qualification; leadership is often passed from mother to daughter or through female members of the family. Men cannot inherit possession, but may claim to have been "called to it". As described by Erika Bourguignon, in the Blue Nile region zar-based activities are described in terms of "the box", or "al-ilba", which refers to the large metal trunk or container in which the leader of each group keeps her zar paraphernalia and symbols of her knowledge. No two boxes are the same, as every leader inherits her original "box" from the person with whom she trained, and from whom she acquires

knowledge and experience.

The Egyptian zar is usually set in a large room with an altar. In whatever country the zar occurs, it is important that the domestic living space be separated from sacred space, or the place of sacrifice to the zar. In some cases this may be a separate room of the house, in others it may be a house rented especially for the purpose. In Egypt the altar is a round tray placed on a tall stool and is placed in the center of the room. It is covered with a white cloth and is piled with nuts and dried fruits. The Kodja and her musicians occupy one side of the room, the participants the rest of the room. The guests are expected to contribute an amount of money appropriate to their station. Having a zar ceremony can be very profitable, but it is understood that the zar leader is someone to whom the women can go to for help in times of need - thus it also functions as a kind of charitable society in which members both give and receive help.

The woman for whom the zar is prepared may wear white, often a man's jalabiya, or shirt. She wears henna on hands and body, and kohl in her eyes. She may also be heavily perfumed, as are the guests. Duriye Abdullahi, a native of Somalia, says that perfumes (especially frankincense) are the most common offerings to zar spirits. At the beginning of the ceremonies, an aromatic censor is passed among the guests, so that they might purify their bodies by inhaling the fragrances.

The Kodja is expected to be a trained singer, who knows the songs and rhythms of each particular spirit. As she sings each spirit's song and watches for a reaction, she is able to diagnose which type of spirit has taken possession and how to "treat" it. The musical instruments used are the tar, a kind of tambourine, and the tabla. The number of "helpers" ranges from three to six and provide rhythmic backup. During the zar ceremonies the various spirits are summoned by their own distinctive drum beat (or "thread"). The Kodja also has a collection of costumes, which she provides to the possessed one in an effort to accommodate it.

If an animal sacrifice is used, it might be a chicken, pigeons, a sheep, or even a camel if the woman is rich. In any case, providing some type of food or meal is an essential part of the ceremony. Ethiopian spirits are said to be very fond of coffee. Non-muslim spirits may demand alcoholic drinks, while female spirits may prefer sweet drinks like Cola. In the Sudan, in those areas where a sacrificial animal is considered necessary, the patient's recovery is not considered complete until the sacrificial meal is consumed on the final evening. This generally consists of meat, bread, rice and spicy broth.

The Zar is not an "exorcism" as people often describe it because the spirit is accommodated and placated; it is not exorcised. The patient is advised to "be continually attentive to her spirits, perform such daily work as they require, avoid dirt, and refrain from negative emotion." Failure to do this may result in a relapse. The fact that this advice is as valid for modern western women as it is for zar patients testifies to the very practical nature of the zar experience.

PART 3: What we can learn from the Zar ...

The Zar ritual is a cathartic experience, which functions for women in these cultures as

effectively as does psychotherapy in western culture. It involves several critical aspects which all contribute to its success as therapy:

- The patient is the center of attention, and receives the help and concern of her friends and relatives. Her experience and feelings are recognized as valid. As Dance Therapist Claire Schmais explains, "It is community based, followers and members are not sent away to be cured....it creates a sense of community while it heals, embracing the individual within a community."
- Rituals are used to creating the setting. It has specific players and roles: a leader, a drum core, a "patient" and participants. These rituals include an altar, the smell of incense, and costumes. Songs are chanted and drums play trance-like rhythms. The zar provides a multisensory experience with sights, sounds and smells.
- The ritual sharing of food, which creates communion in all cultures and times. Thus, it is important to understand these rituals in the context of the total experience.

The major elements of the zar experience can be used by women in our culture to create more meaningful dance experiences, in whatever ritual context they prefer. This could be done in either as religious, or secular context.

- Through the sense of "moving together", a sense of closeness builds between members of the group. This is true whether the participants are trained as dancers, or not. Also, the experience of being the center of attention is, in itself, a therapeutic experience, when surrounded by friends. A gathering at the time of crisis in someone's life, one of welcome, or one to say farewell would be entirely natural.
- "Ritual" can mean something as simple as burning incense, placing flowers in a room, or lighting candles. Anyone who has performed for an audience can appreciate how important it is to "set the stage", and create an appropriate mood. Wearing costumes is certainly familiar to all of us as part of what makes the dance a special experience. Something as simple as handling out hip scarves and veils at a dance "demo-lecture" can add to the experience for non-dancers. As dancers, we can also testify to the hypnotic effect created when the right drum rhythms are used. The function of the "leader" is also important because it keeps the group on track, and frees everyone else from worrying about "what to do next". The drums also serve to focus everyone's attention on the ritual aspect of what's happening, and set the mood and flow of the event with rhythm.
- Eating together is a familiar way to end the ritual which brings people closer together, and helps each one feel that they are being "nutured" and appreciated.

PRACTICAL ASPECTS

In regard to dance "choreography", traditional "zar" movements include tossing of the

head and swaying. It is important to be aware that these movements can be dangerous, especially for people with neck or shoulder problems. Shakira of Columbus, Ohio, uses Alexander technique to teach doing this movement safely. She explains, "The most important thing is to relax into the movement, and not to try to control it. Relaxing and letting the weight of the head do the work is key to not being injured. Being tense and afraid of the motion is much more likely to lead to an injury. If you do it for a long time you will get a sore neck, but that's just from working the muscles."

Samples of zar rhythms can be found on the following albums:

- An excellent explanation of Egyptian zar rhythm is given on Hossam Ramzy's Introduction to Egyptian Rhythms, and probably some zar done on his many performance albums.
- A very nice 5 minute zar done on the old Sultans album, volume II.
- The best album I've found for personal use is Stephen Flynn's Inner Dances, which has a new age style 20 minute warmup on side A, and on side B, a 13 minute segment of trance drumming and a 5 minute zar finale.

I also can't resist recommending the "Modern Mystics" segment of the Firedance album with Brian Keane and Omar F. Tekbilek (also a member of the Sultans). It's not specifically a zar rhythm, but it's a trance-like piece with the Islamic vow repeated endlessly. (Please try not to use this for performance as you may offend members of the audience if they are Muslim). My other favorite album for "trancing out" is Black Beats by the Moroccan Jewish group, Natural Gathering. The title song leaves you convinced that God was in the mood for drumming that day!

Whatever your taste in music, I hope you find in your dance an opportunity for personal growth and fulfillment.

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