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Spirit Possession and Gender Complementarity Zâr in Rural Northern Sudan

Janice Boddy

July 20, 1976, 4:00 P.M. The door to my hôsh bangs open. Asia ducks beneath the lintel, lifts the water container from her head, and pours its contents into my zâr. Her face is seamed with sweat. "Allaaah!" she exclaims, "The land is hot today! Shufti, ya Janice, I've heard they are drumming in Goz. Do you want to go?"

Of course!—a zâr is on. But the walk in this heat is a long one, and my leg has been badly swollen for several days.

"Sadig is borrowing camels from his cousin. You must ride."

Moments later I am teetering sidesaddle, following the equally inept Sadig along a trail that hems some withered fields of maize. My camel munches lazily at each low acacia, and I am soon covered in scratches from their thorns. Prodding seems only to anger the beast, and I fear a painful bite; it would have been faster to walk. Still beyond sight of Goz we are reached by the deep bass of drumming, fitful through the sultry air. The camels perk, raise their heads, start trotting toward the sound.

Goz is a newish settlement, an odd assortment of square thatched huts, thorn corrals, and a couple of half-completed mud-brick hôshs. The drumming comes from one of these. Hofriyati¹ arriving by foot have preceded my arrival; the zâr has just begun. Ideally a zâr should take place in the room of a house,

if capacious, but because of the heat, today's has been mounted in the yard.

A litany of greetings over, I am seated near the dancing grounds an open area (mîdân) bounded on three sides by palm-fiber ground mats. Here sit several dozen chanting women: the spirit-possessed. Now and then one rises to her knees and begins to move her upper body in time with the sonorous beat. In the center of the mîdân stands the shaykha—zâr practitioner or "priestess"—a forceful, brawny woman in an electric-pink pullover, tôb² tied loosely at her waist. She is arguing with a woman just as brash as she, who, between expletives, puffs furiously on a cigarette. I learn that the shaykha speaks not to the woman but to her spirit, in an effort to diagnose the source of the woman's complaint. Observing from the side is a tall, very black, incongruously muscled figure clad in a tôb, large wristwatch, and hairnet—the shaykha's reputedly transvestite assistant from south of Shendi. In contrast, the ayâna—"sick woman" and focus of the ceremony—is frail, elderly. She rests quietly on a pillow next to the musicians, facing the front of the hôsh, arms and legs curled tight against her white-tôbed body.

The shaykha concludes her discussion, sits down, and starts to drum. Using only the tips of her fingers, she beats a large earthen dallûka stretched with goat hide, its whitened flanks boldly adorned with mauve geometric designs. Another dallûka responds in shifted accents, joined half a second later by the nugarishan, a tall brass mortar that rings, when struck, like a cowbell, only deeper. A fourth woman beats a complementary rhythm on

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an inverted aluminum washtub or *tisht*. The result is a complicated syncopation, its underlying pattern one long beat, three short. The sound is less soothing than cacophonous, yet endlessly repeated and accompanied by reiterative chants, the effect is indeed soporific. The chants, I learn, are called "threads"—*khayūt* (singular is *khayt*)—and when sung they are said to be "pulled."

The rhythm intensifies; the *ayāna* rises to dance. Now visible over her *tōb* is a red sash attached to a reddish waist cloth in the style of a Sam Browne belt. She is possessed, my companions say, by *Khawāja* (Westerner) spirits: a doctor, lawyer, and military officer—all of these at once. Yet it is the lattermost she appears to manifest in dance. Her *tōb* is folded cowl-like over her head, obscuring her face; she flourishes a cane—hooked, as in vaudevillian burlesque. Her dance is a slow, rhythmic walk crisscrossing a chimeric square, feet first moving side to side, then forward and back. With a leap of the imagination she is an officer of the desert corps conducting drill. Every so often she bends rigidly at the hip and, cane pressed to her forehead, bobs her torso up and down. I am told that her spirits have requested the white *tōb*, cane, cigarettes, "European" belt, and yet to be purchased, a radio.

The band takes up the chant of another *zār*. The *ayāna* sits; the *shaykha* leaves her drum and starts to dance, *tōb* covering her head. Suddenly, the *tōb* is thrown off. She turns on her heel, goose-steps the length of the *midān*, stops before me, abruptly pulls herself to attention. She salutes me three or four times, stiffly, eyes glazed and staring, a grin playing wildly on her face. Her left hand grips a sword within its sheath; with her right she grasps my own with unusual strength and pumps it "Western style" in time to the drums. I am shaken by this treatment and by thoughts of her sword. The chant sounds like a military march: I recognize the British Pasha spirit, *Abu Rîsh Ya Amîr ad-Daysh* ("Owner of Feathers, O Commander of the Army"). The drums desist. At once my hand is released. The *shaykha*'s features assume a more dignified composure and she returns to the center of the *midān*.

Evening falls. Women rise to dance—or "descend" (*nazal*), as the *zār* step is called—throughout the night. Others respond to the spirits' chants from a kneeling position, bobbing up and down from the waist, *tōbs* covering their heads like so many Halloween ghosts. One who stands has mounted a *zār* in

the past: she has "slaughtered" (*dabahat*, for *dhabahat*) for the spirits, thus confirming relations with those by which she is possessed. A woman who remains sitting or kneeling has yet to sacrifice; though acknowledged to be possessed, and perhaps even aware of the types of *zayran* that bother her, she remains somewhat uncertain of her spirits and limited to kneeling at their ceremonies until she undertakes a cure. Yet she is no less an adept for this.

In the waning, eerie light I see a woman—spirit—performing a strange pantomime with a sword, crouching low, sweeping the flat of the weapon back and forth along the ground. She dashes through these postures with skill and grace; I am reminded of a hunter flushing game, or a soldier wary of enemies lying hidden in dense vegetation.

At the start of another chant a tall older woman dressed in red lights a cigarette. She struts down the *midān*, smoking, walking stick held perpendicular to the ground at the end of an outstretched arm, pompous, indifferent, mandarinlike. Some chants later she reappears, transmogrified. Now she and the transvestite stage a sword fight closely resembling the men's dance of a nearby desert people. The combatants leap at each other with apparent abandon, landing within inches of the audience, their sharp unsheathed blades swooping dangerously from aloft. Spectators shrink in terror at their bravado. The two are possessed, I learn, by *zayran* of the Arab (Nomad) species.

Occasionally during the evening's drumming, the *shaykha* dances around the *ayāna*, encircling her with her arms, coaxing a seemingly reluctant spirit to enter its host and fully reveal itself before the assembly. But the *ayāna* has not risen since her foray into the *midān* at the start. She sits, silently watching.

I notice at the end of each chant that several who have "descended"—standing or kneeling—begin to scratch themselves, and hiccup and burp indiscriminately. Zaineb tells me these reactions signify the spirit's departure from the body of its host, of a woman's leaving trance.

July 24, 5:30 P.M. Last day of the ceremony. The sacrificial ram is led into the *midān*, and a red and gold cloth—a *garmosis* or bridal shawl—is placed over its back and head. The musicians play a chant. Incense is freshly lit, and the brazier thrust beneath the shawl. The animal is forced to inhale the smoke, then led from the *midān* and slaughtered by the *ayāna*'s son. Blood spurting from its throat is collected

in a bowl and placed before the drums. The *ayâna* crosses seven times over the carcass before it is dragged off to be butchered. With the others I now step forward to deposit a few piasters in the victim's congealing blood. Someone whispers an invitation to drink *araki* (liquor). . . being *khawâja* (a westerner) I am expected to imbibe. The possessed anoint themselves with blood, some also take a sip; the *shaykha* daubs it on herself and the *ayâna*'s feet and arms. Drumming and chanting recommence. Still wearing her stigmata of the zâr the *ayâna* rises to dance.

A woman "descends" with a prayer shawl round her neck, holding its fringed ends in her hands, rocking to and fro as she paces the *mîdân*. The gesture echoes that of men at a *zikr*, a "remembrance" ceremony of the Islamic (*sûfi*) fraternities from whose membership women are excluded.

Later another woman (Zaineb's cousin and sister-in-law) dances briskly wearing trousers of a European cut; she is possessed, I learn, by the Airplane Captain zâr.

Later still, an older lady performs the local "pigeon dance," concluding with a *shabâl*³ to the dancer in the Mediterranean head scarf. She has been seized by Muna, Sitt ash-Shabâl, a southern prostitute zâr given to mimicking village women when appearing in their midst.

An unwed girl now rises, snatches up the bridal shawl, and flings it over her head. She shuffles forward, out of time with the chant. Onlookers gasp. This is the costume of *Lulîya*, the Ethiopian prostitute fond of *Hofriyati* weddings whose thread was sung some time ago; it is unlikely that She⁴ would return so soon, and uninvited. The audience tries to dissuade the girl without success. It is not right, they say, for an unmarried girl to dance so like a bride, in public. Has she no shame? Beside me a woman snaps, "That virgin is not possessed (*mazûr*). She just wants a husband!"

Night falls; a pressure lamp is placed on a low table near the musicians. The *mîdân* is a pond of light shallowing to darkness at its sides. Dancers cast weird shadows on the sand, eyes in faces lit from below appear enormous, wild. Drums throb without flagging; redolent smoke of incense clouds the evening. The atmosphere is tense, intoxicating, eerie.

A piercing cry—a uniformed schoolgirl nine or ten years old has sprawled forward into the *mîdân*, upheld on all four limbs, body jerking rapidly up and down from the shoulders. Immediately, she is led

off by some older women, told it is not proper for a child to behave this way at a zâr. But she does not stop. Outside the *mîdân* the women try to calm her. Now she is sobbing and has gone quite limp. When efforts to revive her fail she is dragged, resisting, back into the center. She balks at attempts to bring her to the *shaykha* and is deposited before the drums. The *shaykha* approaches; the girl cringes. The *shaykha* censures her, covers her with a white *tôb*, and asks, "What do you want? Who are you?" No response.

Onlookers taunt the intrusive zâr, trying vainly to garner its sympathy: "Ah, her father is poor! Her mother is blind! Her brother is ill!" The *shaykha* sends for the girl's father. He is brought into the *mîdân* and made to give his daughter's spirit ten piasters (about twenty-five cents). Still there is no word from the zâr; the girl remains limp, appearing deeply entranced.

It is getting late. Smells of cooking waft through the *mîdân*, and laughter from the kitchen. More drumming and dancing are called for. The *shaykha* requests certain threads to test for various species of *zayran*, hoping the presumptuous spirit will be drawn to identify itself. She blows into the schoolgirl's ears and behind her neck, she pulls at her limbs, whips her softly with a length of rope, beats her lightly with an iron spear. She censures her, rolls her head along the girl's body. She takes the girl in her arms and dances to and fro, blowing a whistle to the incessant beat. She leads the girl around the *mîdân* and is twice successful in getting her to move briefly of her own accord. At last the girl jogs back and forth through the open space, one arm pumping like the wheel of a locomotive, the other, raised and crooked at elbow, sounding an imagined alarm. The *shaykha* blows her pipe whistle in accompaniment. The troublesome spirit is identified: Basha-t-Adil the *Khawâja* railway engineer.

Still the episode continues. For over an hour the *shaykha* tries every technique in her repertoire, aiming to convince the implacable zâr to abandon his newfound host and refrain from bothering her again until she is a woman and married. Finally the *shaykha* guides the girl out of the *mîdân* and out of the *hîsh*. They cross the threshold, the *khashm al-bayt*,⁵ backwards, facing the assembly; they remain in the path for several minutes, then return as they had left facing the *mîdân*. The girl, now calmed and weeping softly, is brought to sit near me—a human *khawâja*—but placed with her back to the ritual.

Soon the sacrificial meal is served and proceedings brought to a close. It is almost 2:00 A.M. The *ayâna* is now formally well, though tomorrow she must eat the head meat of the ram in a private ceremony followed by a procession to the Nile. Several people approach the *ayâna*, touch her right shoulder and say "Insha 'allâh byinfâk, "God willing, it is benefiting you." In the company of my neighbors I return, exhausted, to Hofriyat.

ZÂR AND ZAYRAN

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 *zâr* they are common and expected. The ceremony is rich in complex imagery and movement. Yet it has none of the solemn pageantry of a Mass, nor the predictable, repetitive manipulation of symbols which I, raised as a Catholic, might have found familiar. The tone of a *zâr* resembles neither the subdued formality of a Muslim Friday prayer, nor the unorchestrated ceremoniousness of life cycle rites in Hofriyat. It is closer in character to *zikrs* of the Qadriya and Khatmiya *sûfi* orders in Sudan, but lacks their cohesion and transcendent focus. What is singular about a *zâr* is its spontaneity, its imagination, whose basis nonetheless is a comprehensive repertoire of symbols and spirit roles—a resource on which participants draw for inspiration. Moves are lightly choreographed—improvisations on well-known themes; "players" are interchangeable, costumes readily borrowed and exchanged. But during the performance, neither players' bodies nor their costumes belong to village women—they belong, instead, to *zayran*. *Zâr* rituals are always fraught with tension and surprise, for at any moment a woman might be "seized" by a spirit that Hofriyati did not before know existed, or she did not know she had.

How is all of this to be understood? What is this phenomenon; who or what are these spirits that so dramatically appear in women's bodies?

THE POSSESSION CONCEPT

Zâr refers to a type of spirit, the illness such spirits can cause by possessing humans, and the rituals necessary to their pacification. The cult⁶ is found throughout the northern Sudan and variations of the same name appear in Egypt, Ethiopia, Somalia, (where it is called *sâr*), Arabia, and southern Iran.⁷

In writing of spirit "possession" in Hofriyat, I am using indigenous terms. When someone is considered to be affected by a *zâr*, people say of her, *inda rih*, *inda zâr*, or *inda dastûr*⁸—"she has a spirit." Alternatively, they say she is *mazûr* or *madastûr*—"with spirit," possessed. *Zâr* influence, being possessed of and by a spirit, is considered an affliction and expressed as illness. A spirit causes its novice host to suffer; however initial misery should be surpassed by a more positive concern on the part of the spirit for its host's well-being as their relationship progresses. Once possessed, always possessed: *zayran* never wholly abandon those they have chosen as their hosts.

Someone diagnosed as *zâr* possessed is liable to be affected by her spirit(s) at any time. *Zayran* are able to infiltrate the bodies of their hosts at will, a move which villagers say always coincides with the latter's entrancement. According to Hofriyati, possession trance (*ghaybîya* or *ghaybûba*) is a state induced by the spirit's forceful entry into the body, which displaces or shifts the person's human self to another perceptual plane. It is, as Bourguignon (1973: 12–13) suggests, "a radical discontinuity of personal identity"; yet in contrast to her model, the distortion of perception this entails pertains not only to the self but to other entities as well.

Still, trance is only one manifestation of possession in Hofriyat, for *zayran* affect their hosts in countless additional ways (see also Constantinides 1972, 1977; Cloudsley 1983:81). They are always near, or in local parlance "above" (*fôg*), their human hosts, whence they might influence people's perceptions and behaviors in the course of daily life. Further, despite the acknowledged powers of *zayran*, possession trance rarely occurs unpremeditatedly, outside of ritual contexts. Here one is not

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diagnosed as possessed because she becomes entranced; rather, she becomes entranced because she is possessed. Schoolgirl mishaps notwithstanding, the possessed rarely enter trance spontaneously; this is something one must learn to do in the course of a curing ceremony in order to negotiate an appropriate relationship with intrusive *zayran*. As adepts put it, one must learn how not to resist a spirit's attempts to enter the human world through the medium of her body. The implicit link to ideas about sexual intercourse in Hofriyat is striking and reiterated in the fact that a woman should be married before she becomes possessed.

Thus trance is in no way aberrant; it is a practiced behavior which the possessed are expected to display under certain conditions. Although an integral part of possession therapy and relapse prophylaxis, it is not consistently evinced by the possessed during ceremonies, and when evinced, it is variable in apparent depth and duration from one episode or individual to the next. Since it is considered inappropriate to be entered by a spirit (or a husband) while menstruating, a woman at a *zâr* signals *zayran* of her condition by tying a knot in her braids, so constraining the spirits' activity. Moreover, because it must conform to prescribed patterns of "spiritness," trance performance requires skill and considerable control. Thus it is not, as some would assert, a spontaneous neurological manifestation of nutritional deficiency which (at least originally) is accounted for after the fact as possession (e.g., Kehoe and Giletti 1981). Such models betray their foundation in a Western rationalism which derogates any mode of consciousness other than that of critical self-awareness. In the search for reductive biological explanations as to why trance should occur, trance itself is misconstrued, parted from its cultural context. Here an essential point is missed. For villagers the system of meaning—possession—is both logically and contextually prior to the behavior—trance—through which it finds expression (cf. Lambek 1981:7).

This is not to deny that biological factors might affect the proclivity to enter trance or the ease with which the behavior is learned.

Some of the possessed initially experience difficulty in becoming lost from themselves and allowing their spirits to assume control; others do not. Here perhaps one's nutritional status plays a role. Still, it must be stressed that Hofriyat generally enter trance after having been diagnosed as possessed or, if undiagnosed, when attending a spirit ritual. And in either case, an individual's trance behavior is learned (cf. Bourguignon 1973:4–15, 1976: 37 ff.), shaped by her knowledge of *zayran* and their provenance. It may be novel and unexpected, but must be consistent with villagers' understanding of spirits to be accepted as legitimate possession and not considered dissimulation or idiosyncratic madness. The few women who do enter trance spontaneously—apparently uninduced, in nonceremonial situations—are hardly neophytes. Rather, they are long-term adepts of the *zâr* who, in the course of their possession careers, have become progressively more skilled at alternating modes of consciousness and allowing the spirits to exhibit themselves through their bodies (see also Besmer 1983:24).

According to Hofriyat, the fact that possession trance typically must be induced and is rare apart from public ritual has less to do with human ability or volition than with spirit caprice. Humans convoke *zayran* through ritual drumming and singing, and normally the spirits—for whom access to the human world is a principal motive for possession—are willing to oblige. Indeed, they regard such invitations as their due, in partial fulfillment of bargains struck with humans, and are likely to become disgruntled and dangerous when neglected or put off. If the possessed take care to mollify them, spirits ought to respond by confining their appearance to ritual contexts where they can frolic and be entertained. Yet none of this is certain. Spirits are willful, and for sport or revenge might "descend" into their hosts without benefit of prior summons. So despite the controlled nature of possession trance and spirit display, the startling possibility exists that at any moment a woman might not be who she usually is.

In Hofriyat possession is a matter of fact. Here the reality of spirits and their powers goes

unchallenged, even by villagers who have no firsthand experience of them and regardless of how hotly they dispute the proper therapy for possession affliction, discussed later. Clearly, Hofriyati, like the rest of us, face doubts concerning their beliefs from time to time. But cosmological mavericks they are not. Doubts, like beliefs, are grounded in a social context. Zayran are immanent in the world of Hofriyat; sceptic and zealot, both, are canopied by their existence.

THE POSSESSED

In Hofriyat, as elsewhere in Sudan, possession activity is mainly, but not exclusively, the province of women.⁹ Somewhat more than 40 percent of Hofriyati women ever married and over the age of fifteen ($N=129$ [1977] and 135 [1984]) claim a *zâr* affliction. Marital status is a significant factor in possession illness: spirits, villagers assert, rarely trouble themselves with the unwed—with women whose fertility has yet to be activated.¹⁰ Most affected are those between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five, two-thirds of whom have spirits. This proportion is due to a cumulative effect: once possessed a woman is always possessed thereafter.

By contrast, only a handful of men from the entire village area are publicly acknowledged to be possessed. In Hofriyat itself only four men (about 5 percent of the resident adult male population) are considered adepts of the *zâr*; three have undergone the requisite ceremonies, one when only thirteen years of age. Two men born in the village but now living elsewhere are known to have spirits, and I obtained information concerning ten others from the vicinity, five of whom were deceased prior to fieldwork. During my six-year absence from the village, only one man had become possessed, in contrast to sixteen women. In 1984, several male acquaintances privately declared themselves to be possessed and confessed admiration for the *zâr*, but would not publicly seek to confirm their afflictions for fear of losing face.

Why is this the case? Why, assuming that possession is a public idiom for the articulation

and interpretation of experience,¹¹ should there exist sexual disproportion among those who acknowledge having spirits? An obvious approach is to ask whether the range of experience that possession constructs is more common to Hofriyati women than to men. This I think to be the case, mainly because possession is closely linked to fertility with which women are identified and for which they bear responsibility. I do not agree with I. M. Lewis (1971, 1986) on this issue, who, arguing from a sociological perspective, suggests that *zâr* possession is a strategy which women use in an oblique attempt to redress the effects of their subordinate social status. Lewis holds that since spirits demand desiderata which husbands must provide if their wives are to regain well-being, possession can be seen as a measure of gender conflict: it is a strategic evocation of shared beliefs by women wishing to mitigate their subordination to men.

The perspective is illuminating, but presents a number of difficulties. First, it places unwarranted emphasis on the assumed intentionality of women and thus insidiously underestimates the factuality of spirits in the Sudanese world. Words like strategy imply volition, which may certainly be present and, if so, motivated by status considerations in some cases of possession but certainly not in all. Moreover, Lewis's deprivation hypothesis appears to presume that women seek the same status held by men, which, since men have deprived them of it, was originally within their purview. Such assumptions fail to bear scrutiny in Hofriyat, where the social worlds of men and women are largely separate and distinct, a condition due not to happenstance or the prevailing wills of men, but to cultural design. Wilson's (1967) critique of the model tries to address this problem by shifting the locus of proposed status competition from intersex to intrasex relations and, in so doing, is sympathetic to the Sudanese context. However, it shares with Lewis's theory the drawback of a conflict orientation to social interaction that is firmly rooted in Western premises of individualism,¹² whose validity in non-Western cultures must be open to debate (cf. Morsy 1978; Boddy 1988). Even granting that status may be a consideration in certain

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episodes of possession illness, the sociological argument cannot account for the *zâr* in its entirety. It glosses over the issue of belief and is therefore unable to explain or interpret possession forms (for example, the characteristics of spirits, the nature and variety of possession symptoms) and processes (such as the reevaluation of one's past that acquiring a spirit entails). Such factors, however important to the possessed, are implicitly deemed incidental when the investigator's focus is competition.¹³ The social status model is unidimensional, at once too general in application and too narrow in concern to deal adequately with the complexities of *zâr*.

It is imperative to ask why so many scholars—among them Kehoe and Giletti (1981)—are committed to viewing possession as a consequence of women's deprivation rather than their privilege, or perhaps their inclination. Such explanations consistently mislocate the question of why women should be more susceptible to possession than men. Especially in his early work, Lewis (1971:77), for example, suggests that joining a *zâr* coterie enables women to express solidarity vis-à-vis men, who are seen as their oppressors. Men have Islam, which excludes women from active participation; hence women, who are socially peripheral, must resort to the equally peripheral cult of *zâr* both to mitigate their subordination and to express religious fervor (Lewis 1971: 66–99; see also Lewis 1986:23–50, 102–5). This is a classic but unhappily androcentric portrayal of women, who are forever seen as reacting to men rather than acting for themselves within a specific cultural context.

To avoid such pitfalls, we need to examine closely how the sexes in Hofriyat conceive of their interrelations both collectively and individually. Judging from my informants, some women—by no means all or only those who are possessed—clearly feel subordinate to men, resent their positions, and are not consistently above vituperation. However, their feelings seem to derive less from their status as women than from the specific actions of individual men, notably husbands. And the problem these men pose is not that they deny women, as a class, an elevated social position, but that

they sometimes—often inadvertently—thwart individual women's legitimate attempts to achieve it. The reverse can also be said for women, who may frustrate the status aspirations of men. Both sexes are active participants in the social life of Hofriyat, bisected as it is into gender-distinct yet partially overlapping spheres. If men are central and women peripheral with respect to Islam and external relations, women are central and men peripheral when it comes to physical, social, and cultural reproduction: the worldliness of village life. Although men and women are subject to different constraints, the actions of each bear consequence for those of the other.

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. Although a Marxist critique might legitimately consider this to be a mystification of political realities, it cannot be ignored if we are truly concerned with the meaning of *zâr* to women and men in Hofriyat. Political relations are mystified for both within the Hofriyati universe of meaning.

When properly situated in the framework of sexual complementarity, the question of why women as a category should be more likely than men to interpret certain experiences as possession expands to two: Why women? Why not men? As Kapferer (1983:98) astutely argues with respect to women's preponderance in Sri Lankan exorcisms, such questions cannot be resolved by focusing on the possessed's motives and intentions alone, independent of the cultural constructs that inform them. We need to consider the qualities that define the sexes in Hofriyat, the typifications each sex holds of the other, the components of gender identity (see also Nelson 1971). Only then might we have a basis for deciding whether a particular incidence of possession constitutes attempted cross-sex or intrasex status manipulation, or

something else—an expression of psychological or social disturbance (cf. Crapanzano 1973, 1977b, 1980; Obeyesekere 1970, 1981; Kapferer 1983, 1986), cross-sex communication (cf. Lambek 1980, 1981), religious experience (cf. Constantinides 1972, 1977; Lewis 1986), a form of play, dramatic allegory, or all of these and more. Its cultural underpinnings—idioms of the everyday world, prosaic conceptualizations of gender—empower possession as a form of social discourse.

Thus put, a focus on the articulatory potential of possession instead of on the status aspirations of individuals possessed changes the tenor of the analytic enterprise. It widens the interpretive net and does not attempt to simplify matters where simplicity belies the facts. Rather, it makes possible a variety of explanations at different levels of analysis and experience, all of them immanent in the *zâr* as a system of meaning, all of them potentially relevant to any specific episode of possession.

Returning to Hofriyati gender constructs and the *zâr*, both sexes allege that women are naturally more vulnerable to spirit attack as a function of their femininity.¹⁴ Spirits are attracted to women—and married women in particular—for it is they who use henna, perfumes, soaps, and scented oils; wear gold jewelry and diaphanous wraps, all human finery which spirits are known to covet. The proclivities of *zayran* are symmetrical to those of Hofriyati women: both are regarded as consumers of goods provided by men.

Although many questions remain to be addressed, this goes some way toward explaining why women interpret certain experiences and illness episodes as possession. It also suggests why, in this sexually polarized community, men do not. But here more remains to be said. A common characterization of women that they do not completely share is that because they are wanting in *'agl* (reason or social sense), they lack sufficient moral strength to uphold the tenets and ideals of Islam. According to local religious authorities it is reprehensible and abhorrent—though not, strictly speaking, *haram* (forbidden)—for Muslims to traffic with spirits. They say that each individual has the responsibility to steer a proper

course of spirit avoidance, something women find more difficult to do than men. Women's perceived inability to resist and so deny *zayran* access to earthly pleasures is put down to their inherent moral frailty, notwithstanding that they are more likely to encounter jinn than men. Just as the public identity of women accounts for their greater participation in the *zâr* so the public identity of men as pious Muslims accounts, in part, for their forbearance (see also Lambek 1981:62–64).

The last is solely a masculine perspective. Women see no incompatibility between the *zâr* and Islam: to them possession ritual is part of a general religious enterprise (cf. Constantinides 1972:98). Hofriyati culture therefore contains conflicting interpretations of the relationship between possession and Islam. These, in turn, have divergent implications for the handling of troublesome spirits.

EXORCISM VERSUS ACCOMMODATION

Where men hold the reputedly orthodox view that intrusive spirits can and must be dislodged from the body by force, women maintain that *zayran* cannot be got rid of at all.¹⁵ Adepts insist that if one's illness is caused by a *zâr*, no amount of Islamic or even Western medicine will effect a cure. Attempts to exorcise the spirit serve merely to exacerbate the patient's condition. Symptom remission alone can be achieved, and only if the afflicted agrees to hold a propitiatory ceremony on behalf of the as yet unnamed *zâr*. During this ceremony, often held long after her initial illness has dissipated, the possessed enters into a contractual relationship with the spirit(s) responsible for her lapse from health. There, in response to drumming and singing chants associated with the various named *zayran*, she ideally enters trance: a spirit's chant is an invitation to "descend" (*nazal*) and enter the body of its host, where its identity can be affirmed and its demands revealed.¹⁶ In return for certain offerings, acquisitions, and observances, the invasive spirit agrees to restore, and refrain from further jeopardizing, its host's well-being.

Henceforward *zâr* are joined in partnership. The spirit exerts its influence. To some extent the spirit's compliance but only so long as the ceremonies of devotion and mourning belie clean and sweet given over to these provisions relapse. Yet the communications between hoped that any with expeditious tive, contracts were negotiable, so if further attack scrupulous care what begins as a full spirit and its graduate to position stabilize symptoms of possession establishing relationship spirit and host become, like the marriage, one of mutual accommodation.

Although the propitiation of a spirit deny that such spirits comprise a distinct invisible beings parallel to our own imperceptible t. Typical of their transformation from human form (bodies feet are always human live human bodies in the Quran (Sura 72, and 114); the key part of both.

Further, should the chance that the spirit regardless of its recognize the presence edge that even

Henceforward, human host and possessive *zâr* are joined in continuous but unequal partnership. The spirit remains above her, able to exert its influence or infiltrate her body at will. To some extent the possessed can rely on the spirit's compliance in maintaining her health, but only so long as she regularly attends the ceremonies of others, abstains from traditional mourning behavior, associates herself with clean and sweet-smelling things, and is not given over to strong emotion. A violation of these provisions renders her vulnerable to relapse. Yet the curing rite has opened communications between the two entities, and it is hoped that any future problems can be dealt with expeditiously. From the spirit's perspective, contracts with humans are infinitely renegotiable, so if the possessed wishes to allay further attack from her *zâr*, she must take scrupulous care to mollify it. If all goes well, what begins as an uneasy truce between a willful spirit and its initially reluctant host might graduate to positive symbiosis as their relationship stabilizes and matures. Alleviating the symptoms of possession illness is a matter of establishing reciprocal obligations between spirit and host; their relationship should become, like that between partners in a marriage, one of complementarity, exchange, and mutual accommodation.

Although the majority of men denounce the propitiation of *zayran*, this is not because they deny that such spirits exist. In Hofriyat, *zayran* comprise a distinct class of *jinn*,¹⁷ mischievous invisible beings that populate a world that is parallel to our own and contiguous with it but imperceptible to humans most of the time. Typical of their exceptional attributes, *jinn* can transform themselves into animals, assume human form (but incompletely so, for their feet are always hooved), or take possession of live human bodies at will. *Jinn* are mentioned in the Quran (Suras 6, 17, 18, 34, 37, 46, 55, 72, and 114); they are a constant if often low-key part of both men's and women's daily lives.

Further, should a man become ill there is a chance that the diagnosis will be possession regardless of its feminine associations. Men recognize the powers of *zayran* and acknowledge that even the most pious among them

occasionally succumbs to spirit attack. But this is where their public support for the cult stops: most insist that, despite a practiced resistance, *zayran*, like other *jinn*, must eventually capitulate to the powerful exorcistic techniques of Islamic medicine. In the company of their fellows they decry as un-Islamic women's ceremonial attempts to assuage and socialize the spirits.

In face of such weighty opposition the *zâr* cult thrives, and its rites are attended even by the most submissive and religious of wives. For women, *zâr* falls squarely within the purview of Islam. And when arguing their position with men (something I witnessed only twice), women said that Allah expects the afflicted to seek respite from their suffering—clearly, it is better to be healthy than “broken” by spirits or overzealous efforts to dislodge them. Perhaps men are right that involvement in the cult imperils one's prospect of a pleasurable afterlife, but then, is Allah not merciful?

Men, for their part, though publicly adamant that only exorcism is correct in the eyes of Islam, are privately not so intractable (cf. Barclay 1964:206; Constantinides 1982). Often hesitant, concerned, uncertain that Islamic medications will effect a cure or fearing reprisals of a powerful spirit if it is put off, most do not interfere when their womenfolk conduct propitiatory ceremonies, and provide money to meet the spirits' demands. Here perhaps, as Lewis (1971: 88) suggests, men tacitly recognize the contradiction between the formal ideology of male supremacy and the social (and cultural) importance of women. Intriguing, too, in the light of the ethnographic situation in Hofriyat, is Lewis's more recent view that woman's participation in the *zâr* might offer men “the privilege of vicarious participation in what they ostensibly condemn as superstition and heresy. Thus, if there is a dual spiritual economy [male and female], its two branches are interdependent and complementary” (Lewis 1986:106). It seems plausible that just as men's religious devotions count also for their womenfolk (1986:106), so women's *zâr* devotions might count indirectly for their men. As noted earlier, several male informants confided in 1984 that they believe themselves

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NOTES

1. Hofriyat is a pseudonym for the Sudanese village where I began conducting field work in 1976. "Hofriyat" refers to the people of the village, all of whom speak Arabic and profess Islam. The village is located on the Nile, a little over 120 miles (200 km) north and east of Khartoum.
2. A woman's modesty garment, consisting of some nine meters of cloth wound around the body and covering the head.
3. A flick of the hair, a movement said to confer luck on the recipient.
4. I use an initial capital letter (e.g. He, She) when referring to a specific spirit in order to indicate its sex while distinguishing it from its human host.
5. Literally, mouth of the house.
6. For a discussion of the cult's possible origins, see Boddy 1989 and Constantinides 1991.
7. On northern Sudan, see Constantinides 1977, 1982, 1991; Kenyon 1991, 2000. On zār in Egypt, see Al-Guindi 1978; Kennedy 1978; Saunders 1977; in Ethiopia, Leiris 1958; Young 1975; in Somalia, where it is better known as *sar*, Lewis 1971, 1986; in Arabia, Trimingham 1965:258; and in southern Iran, Modaressi 1968.
8. This term literally means "statute" or "constitutional law," and colloquially, "permission" (Wehr 1976:281). In northern Sudan, however, the term also refers to a door jamb (Constantinides 1977:65–66, n. 6) or a bolt (Hillelson 1930:35). The reference to doorways is significant, and discussed in Boddy 1989.
9. See Barclay (1964:196–206); Cloudsley (1983: 67–87); Constantinides (1972, 1977); Trimingham (1965:174–77); Zenkovsky (1950).
10. For a discussion of the relationship between female fertility and possession, see Boddy 1989.
11. See Crapanzano 1977a. This point is more fully developed in Boddy 1989.
12. Although the fluctuating kinship networks of Hofriyat are individualistic, this is not to say that the individual is the focal social unit in Hofriya. Hofriyat women and men are always subordinate to a range of collective interests: family, lineage, village, religious group, etc.
13. Lewis (1971:30) certainly does not consider other factors unimportant, yet they do not figure into his analysis to the same extent as does the question of cross-sex competition.
14. See Kapferer (1983:100–110) for a similar view of the susceptibility of Sri Lankan women.