



Memory and Alterity in Zar

Religious Contact and Change in the Sudan

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ABSTRACT Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in the Blue Nile town of Sennar, supported by archival and historical documentation, this article explores the history of Zar spirit possession in Sudan, and the light this throws on the interplay of religions over the past 150 years. Life history data supports the argument that contemporary Zar is grounded in forms and rituals derived from the ranks of the nineteenth-century Ottoman army, and these remain the basis of ritual events, even as they accommodate ongoing changes in this part of Africa. Many of these changes are linked to the dynamic interplay of Zar with forms of Islam, on the one hand, and Christianity, on the other. In the former colonial periods, political power resided with the British, and *Khawaja* (European) Christian Zar spirits are remembered as far more important. Today that authority in Zar has shifted to spirits of foreign Muslims and local holy men, on the one hand, and to subaltern Blacks, on the other. These speak to concerns of new generations of adepts even as changes in the larger political and religious landscapes continue to transform the context of Zar.

KEYWORDS Zar spirit possession, Sudan, military history, slavery, memory

Introduction

Just as Europeans...have created an image of the savage which...has always acted as a counterpart to their own culture and civilization, African societies have also devised their own respective inversions and counterparts which have helped them articulate their sense of self and determine their political and ritual practices (Kramer 1993, 2).

[1]

Zar¹ in Sudan assumed its present shape—in terms of its ritual and form of beliefs—in [2]

the mid-nineteenth century, in the ranks of the Ottoman army (Constantinides 1972; Kenyon 2012; Makris 2000; Seligman 1914). That is not to say that it originated at that time; the sheer complexity of the phenomena suggest that these were already very old beliefs and practices.² What continues to be striking about contemporary Sudanese Zar, however, is how much of the external, visible forms—the nature of the spirits, the ritual acts—are derived from that time. Even as innovations occur, they are grounded in that period.

What is also striking is that these forms are not based on familiars. Unlike possession religions found elsewhere in Africa (e.g. Madagascar, Sharp 1993), nowhere in Zar are there spirits of family members, neighbors, or local communities. Uniformly, Zar spirits represent “the Other:” the foreigner, the dominant colonial powers, the exotic, alien elements that were present in nineteenth-century Egypt, sometimes transformed over time into more contemporary representations of earlier selves. Zar is not static, either in practice or belief. It is constantly adapting and modifying to meet new concerns, even as it remains grounded in a particular time and place. Also worth noting is that the spirits are often referred to as people, people from that particular time and place. In Zar, there are no spirits of inanimate objects, or even of animals.³ Memory and alterity in Sudanese Zar are highly specific, both in terms of period and of identity.

In this paper, I examine these statements further. Based on long-term ethnographic research in the Blue Nile town of Sennar,⁴ I look at:

1. The history of Zar in the town as revealed (largely) through oral narratives, supported by archival and historical documentation.
2. The evidence to support these assertions, provided in contemporary Zar. This is revealed in ritual acts (on the one hand) and in descriptive explanations from adepts (on the other).
3. The light this evidence from Zar throws on religious and cultural contact in this part of Sudan.
4. Changes in Zar ritual and beliefs which underscore changing attitudes to outside contact.

Zar practices in Sennar may differ in detail from those found elsewhere in Sudan, but in broad outline they are very similar, and certainly readily understood by Zar visitors from elsewhere in the country and beyond.⁵

Much of this material is not new and can be found in my other publications. What IS different is a focus on the entanglement of religions (monotheistic and spiritual forms) in northern Africa in the past century and a half, as revealed in Zar.

1 The term Zar refers both to a type of spirit (the “red wind”) and to the ritual and beliefs associated with those spirits, found widely in northern Africa, the Middle East, and beyond. It can also be used to denote a type of illness. Despite political persecution and cultural ridicule, it remains widespread in Sudan, particularly among women, and has now been well documented there for over 50 years (see Boddy 1989; Constantinides 1972, 1991; Kenyon 2004, 2012; Lewis, Hurreiz, and al-Safi 1991; Makris 2000).

2 Earlier anthropologists sought to establish origins for Zar, but increasingly we realize that Zar is linked to other, similar possession religions, in Africa and elsewhere.

3 Even when an animal spirit (such as a crocodile) appears to possess a host, it is viewed through the agency of a human spirit.

4 I first visited Sennar in 1965 but began ethnographic research in 1979.

5 I have attended Zar rituals in Darfur, and the Greater Khartoum area, as well as widely in the Blue Nile region. Sudanese women themselves now travel widely, within the country and overseas, particularly elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East where they might attend Zar ritual. At the same time they continue to support the home group, where their Zar condition was first identified.

The History of Zar in Sennar⁶

Zar has existed in Sennar since at least the early years of the twentieth century. Elsewhere [8] (Kenyon 2009, 2012) I have detailed what is known about its origins there, which coincide with the creation of the modern town.⁷ Shortly after the establishment of Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule in 1898, the Condominium government began exploring a policy of “colonization,” in an attempt to pension off certain old soldiers from both the Anglo-Egyptian and the nationalist armies. These were drawn from the Black Battalions, the ranks of which consisted of emancipated slaves who had converted to Islam. Makwar, a small village on the Blue Nile, was one of the earliest colonies. A few years later this area was chosen as the location for a major dam, construction of which attracted labor from all over the country. By 1930, when the dam was officially opened to great fanfare, the name of the village, now a flourishing town, was changed to Sennar, which was deemed more distinguished (Kenyon 2012, 39–47).

Among the dependents accompanying the colonist ex-soldiers to Makwar early in the twentieth century was a young woman named Zainab. She had been born in Sudan, raised in Upper Egypt, and came south with her soldier husband in 1898 on the invasion of Sudan. Although her descendants later claimed she knew Zar from Egypt, “from the palaces,” it was not until she lived in Makwar, had divorced her first husband, and married a second man that she began to take the lead in organizing Zar rituals. Her second husband, from the south of Sudan, was himself a leader in *tombura* Zar⁸ and is still remembered for the awesome powers he wielded. It was when he tried to cure her illness that Zainab’s own powers in Zar emerged, not as *tombura*, but as *burei* Zar. Adepts claim that much of what is still found in Sennar Zar is derived from what Zainab brought from Egypt, recalling times of luxury in the harems of important Pashas as well as the lives of impoverished African soldiers, the fastidiousness of colonial officers, the pomposity of Greek clergy, and the elegance of Abyssinian concubines. Adepts and leaders alike seem intent on preserving that record.

The later nineteenth century in Egypt witnessed dramatic cultural and religious contact. [10] Since the time of Muhammad ‘Ali (1805–48),⁹ the diversity of the larger Ottoman world was reflected in this part of North Africa, and this only intensified with the processes of modernization and expansion that he and his successors set in place. Various Europeans and Middle Easterners, Central Africans, and Ethiopians were present at this time. Wealthy and urbane politicians and traders, humble artisans and indentured soldiers, peasants and nomads, wealthy women and prostitutes all jostled together in this cosmopolitan world. Egypt also shared in the religious diversity of the Ottoman empire. Although officially Islamic, tolerance was shown to other religions “of the Book.” Christian missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, worked to attract converts; Greek Orthodox and Coptic priests catered to their faithful; and

⁶ My more contemporary information has been derived primarily from the family of Grandmother Zainab, the woman credited with having brought Zar rituals and beliefs from Egypt to the Blue Nile region. Her grand-daughters and great-grand-daughters, as well as other women who trained with her, have continued the traditions she claimed were brought south then.

⁷ Sennar was also the name of the old Funj Capital, located a few miles north of the present town. This was already in ruins by 1900.

⁸ Although Zar adepts identified other early forms of Zar, today only two are practiced: Zar *tombura* and Zar *burei*, which differ in ritual practices and beliefs, and probably in origins, though occasionally they overlap. This paper focuses on Zainab’s Zar: *burei*.

⁹ Muhammad ‘Ali was a Turk from Macedonia who came to Egypt with the Ottoman forces against the French. He then formed his own local Ottoman ruling group and, as governor under Ottoman suzerainty, extended his authority throughout the country and beyond, into Sudan and (briefly) Syria and Arabia (Hourani 1991, 273).

Jewish merchants were active in urban centers. At the same time, slaves from Central Africa brought different ideas about spirituality, unevenly shared by all those captives brought to the markets of Alexandria, Cairo, and Aswan. Many were compelled, by their captors and the authorities they were to encounter in northern Sudan and Egypt, to adopt the official religion—Islam. Their education in Islam, however, was limited, for the most part learned locally and shaped by popular Sufi ideas, which were widespread at that time. There was plenty of space in their new practices and beliefs for older ideas to persist and flourish.

To a lesser extent, those ex-slaves conscripted into the Egyptian army came into contact with Christianity. For some, this was in the figures of their battalion leaders. In 1882, as Ottoman authority was collapsing in Egypt, British representatives occupied the country, creating a protectorate. They disbanded the old Turkish-Egyptian army and created a new force, under British officers. A third of the new army consisted of so-called “Black Battalions,” made up of ex-slaves, particularly Shillukh, Dinka, and Oromo (“Galla”), who were regarded as particularly warlike (Mohammed 1980, 16). Associated with the battalions were their dependents—wives, children, and the elderly, who might accompany their soldiers into battle (Johnson 1988). Although these dependents were neither freed nor expected to convert, ideas and experiences from their new way of life mingled readily with earlier religious understandings.

Some slaves actually came from Christian areas. Most notable were those from Ethiopia, from the Oromo or Abyssinian regions, where they had grown up with the Coptic church. The women especially were renowned for their beauty, and many became concubines, sometimes wives, in Egypt and Sudan, attracting a lot of admiration and interest in the harems of wealthy men and becoming influential in their communities (Klunzinger 1878, 37–38).

In short, large numbers of captive Africans in late Ottoman Egypt and Sudan were brought into contact with one or more monotheistic religions, and in some cases, to formally embrace them. How whole-hearted they were in their acceptance is not something recorded in history books. Rather, it is the rituals of Zar, and how they reflect those religions, that throw light on how they were accommodated and tell us something about memory and the persistence of older beliefs.

The Evidence of Contemporary Zar

The context of nineteenth-century Egypt continues to be highly significant in Sudanese Zar. First and foremost is the classification of Zar spirits, grouped (according to local epistemologies) into seven nations, ‘Others’ all. When called down to visit (i.e. to possess adepts) at formal events, spirits are always summoned in a particular order, knowledge that is regarded as one of the most challenging lessons new Zar leaders have to master (Kenyon 2012, 115). Moreover, within each group individual spirits are also summoned in turn; failure to follow this exact precedence, said to be brought to the town by Grandmother Zainab, is still believed to challenge human relations with the spirits.

First to arrive are the Darawish, spirits of Sufi teachers and holy men.¹⁰ When they leave, they are followed by the Pashawat, spirits of Egyptian-Ottoman nobility; after them come the Europeans, Khawajat; then the Habbashi (Ethiopians); then *nass Arab* (Arab nomads); and finally *nass Zirug*, spirits of wild Black warriors. These include all those major groupings present in Egypt with whom members of the Black Battalions and their dependents would have had

¹⁰ The term is also used for followers of the Mahdi Muhammad Ahmad, who successfully drove Ottoman rulers from Sudan in 1885, and it is interesting to recall that many slave soldiers also served in his army.

contact. Furthermore, they are clearly ranked. Today Islamic groups (Darawish, Pashawat) are most important and Christian groups (Khawajat, Habbashi and Zirug)¹¹ somewhat lower in prestige.

The last group of spirits to come down in formal ceremonies are females from each of these cultural groups. They do not simply echo the male spirits but offer insight into the types of women around in late nineteenth-century Egypt: grandmothers, wives, concubines, and slaves.

[16] It is the Pasha spirits¹² who most openly evoke the sense (or should we say, spirit?) of the period. Pashawat are still regarded as “Big” or “Great” people (spirits) and also as “people from before,” *nass min gibel*. In 1981, Umiyya Fatima, one of the senior leaders in Sennar Zar, who had trained with Grandmother Zainab, described to me the “Box”¹³ that is still alleged to be the basis of Zar in Sennar: the great Istambul Box, *al-‘ilba kabira min Stambuliyya*, which Grandmother Zainab brought from Egypt (Kenyon 2012, 91). The first spirits who came with this were those of Shaikh ‘Abd al-Qadr al-Jilani, the famous Sufi (Darawish) saint, closely followed by several Pashawat. They apparently did not stay with Zainab for long, but the Pashawat remain important in Sennar Zar, though their fortunes have fluctuated over time, as I have witnessed since 1980. They are said to include more than 300 spirits, with a highly specific appearance. Pasha spirits demand their hostess (the person they possess) wear light or pastel shades, white, ivory or cream jalabiyya, with red fez. Some carry walking sticks, others wear overcoats—dress preferences that evoke the formal dress of nineteenth-century Ottoman officials.¹⁴ Vain about their appearance, some Pashas demand a mirror, ostentatiously admiring their image. They rarely talk (and then only in a whisper) but communicate indirectly through the Zar leader. The group includes named individuals, such as Yarima Pasha or Shalabi, and anonymous officials: Pashkatib, the clerk, or Hakim Pasha, doctor-in-chief. Some have titles: Yowra Bey, Sharido Bey, *bey* being an obsolete Ottoman military rank. Collectively they are referred to as “White People,” *nass Bayud*, or “People of the River,” *al-Bahriyyat*, descriptions which reinforce their sense of superiority, contrasted with *nass Zirug*, “Black People”, African spirits from the mountains.

[17] Pasha women, who possess human hosts separately from male spirits, are also regarded as “old/great spirits” or “from before.” They are viewed with some trepidation, their origins are obscure, the disorders they bring are disabling, and their demands onerous. In some accounts, they are linked to the river. They rarely appear on ritual occasions today, but figure large in firsthand accounts of Zar careers and disorders.

[18] The importance of the later nineteenth century is also evident in the way Zar rituals continue to be organized into distinct levels of complexity, known colloquially in Sennar as “Coffee”, “Chairs” and *Karamat*. The *jabana*, coffee (party), is a now frequent, informal gathering to which popular individual spirits are summoned with coffee and incense to dispense advice and entertainment to the human guests. Refreshments including coffee were apparently introduced about 50 years ago (Kenyon 2012, 117), though this type of informal gathering with the spirits was not new. In the 40 years that I have been attending Zar ceremonies, none of these spirit guests have been the important Pashas but are rather the more lowly “young

¹¹ Most peoples from South Sudan are now regarded, in Sennar, as Christians. By 2000, four churches in the town catered to the spiritual needs of Southern refugees and migrants.

¹² A fuller description is found in Kenyon (2012, 97–102, 111–13).

¹³ Box, *al-‘ilba*, is both literally and figuratively the term used to describe individual Zar leaders and their followers as well as the physical container from which the spirits are summoned.

¹⁴ Accessories are usually owned by the leader of each group, who shares them with her followers. Dress is purchased and owned by individual adepts, to flatter their spirit guests.

spirits” linked to the Habbashi group, who are discussed below. This type of informal ritual has become increasingly common as the cost of hosting a formal ceremony has grown beyond the means of most Zar adepts in Sudan.

The more formal level of Zar, the Chair, *al-Kursi*,¹⁵ are occasions for all the spirits to visit. These are healing ceremonies, hosted by an adept sick with a Zar illness. Many women in Sennar today continue to distinguish between different types of disorders: Islamic sickness and modern illnesses are conceptualized as quite distinct from each other and from Zar illnesses. Hosting a Chair demands a great deal of resources, social as well as material, but is seen as the only sure way of easing a serious Zar disorder, by establishing a working relationship with the Zar spirit(s) causing a problem. The goal of a kursi is not to exorcise the spirit but rather to appease it and hopefully persuade it to give future support. During the course of the ceremony¹⁶ all seven nations of spirits are invited down in turn, through drumming and incense, but those spirits responsible for the disorder are treated with special deference. Various types of rituals are included in the kursi, depending on which Zar spirits are being honored. There is usually at least one animal sacrifice, and the structure of this type of healing ceremony is based on what Zainab brought from Egypt.

The final level of ritual, the *Karama*, (pl. *Karamat*) blessing, is linked to the Islamic, particularly Sufi, calendar and is hosted by the leader of each group, supported by all her followers. The most important ceremonies are those held during the Islamic month of *Rajab*,¹⁷ two months before Ramadan, the month of fasting, when Zar spirits are said to be “tied” and inactive. Rajab is when human ties with the spirits are celebrated and renewed, a communal celebration for human adepts and spirits alike. The emphasis is on the whole Zar community, *al-Jama'a*.

The Light this Evidence Throws on Religious and Cultural Contact

According to colonial records of the nineteenth century, religious contact in Sudan and Upper Egypt was dominated by the two monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam. Those slaves from central Africa who brought fresh ideas about spirituality and possession rituals were outwardly controlled by the colonial authorities, Ottoman and British, Islamic and Christian. Religious conversion to Islam was a prerequisite for those conscripted into the Egyptian army, which in turn led to their nominal freedom,¹⁸ and it was assumed by those in authority to be a way of assimilating and controlling the newcomers.

The major expression of Islam in Upper Egypt at this time was Sufi, and many leaders of the brotherhoods were instrumental in channeling religious and political control by the urban political elite (e.g. Gilsenan 1982, 241). However, it was the older, loosely structured or acephalous orders, notably the Qadriyya and Ahmadiyya (Badawiyya) brotherhoods (Karrar 1992, 20–22; Kenyon 2012, 14–15), which attracted the new converts from the Black Battalions. The Qadriyya, more open than other orders towards people of slave descent, remains

¹⁵ The origin of the term “Chair” is unknown, though the Arabic *kursi* refers to a foreign item of furniture. There is no seat of any sort involved in the ritual.

¹⁶ A Kursi can last one, three, or seven days, depending on the resources of the host(s).

¹⁷ The seventh month in the Islamic calendar, celebrated by Sufis and Zar adepts alike.

¹⁸ As Johnson (1988, 147) pointed out, this was an “ambiguous liberty” at best, since most had no home to return to, and no means of support other than the army. This was the form of freedom that was passed on to their descendants.

the most popular and widespread order in the Muslim world. Named after ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (1077–1166), jurist, teacher, and mystic in Persia and Baghdad, it was brought to North Africa by his followers in the sixteenth century. Al-jilani and Ahmad al-Badawi (1200–1276), considered the greatest saint in Egypt,¹⁹ are both remembered as two of the four *qutb* (literally “pole” or head of the hierarchy of saints) of the Sufis.

No doubt the lack of political or social hierarchy, as well as the mysticism and trance at the heart of the orders’ practices, were what appealed to the displaced Africans who suddenly found themselves to be Muslim. Another newer, centralized order, the Tijanniyya, with roots in Africa and the Nile basin,²⁰ was also popular with the Black Battalions. Though Karrar (Karrar 1992, 135) described this as intolerant of its followers’ disobedience, it was also known for its philosophical (rather than ecstatic) mysticism and liberalism, which had a wide appeal. This has become one of the most active of the African orders, particularly in Sudan and West Africa (Trimingham 1949, 236–9).

The influence of these orders in shaping modern Zar ritual and belief is marked. Most obvious perhaps is the primacy accorded to the spirit of al-Jilani in all formal Zar ceremonies. Yet when the evidence found in Zar is taken into account, it appears that some of this influence was appropriated and reshaped to fit the demands of possession ritual. We have already noted how the Zar calendar is linked to the Sufi calendar in very immediate ways. The annual month of Thanksgiving, Rajab, continues to be celebrated in Sennar by Sufi brotherhoods and Zar groups alike, and different Zar leaders today host week-long ceremonies which occupy the whole month. The twenty-seventh day of Rajab, said by tradition to be when the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven (*al-Mi’raj*), is particularly important for both Sufi and Zar adepts. In Sennar Zar only the senior leaders celebrate on that day, those leaders descended directly from Grandmother Zainab. Thus, genealogy in Zar becomes no less important than in the leadership of the brotherhoods; the chain of spiritual authority or descent, *al-silsila*,²¹ is observed and respected by leaders and followers alike.

This appropriation of structure from the *turuq* was not simply borrowing or copying; it was modified in Zar, giving it a distinctive form. Thus Rajab, in Zar, is a time of giving to the spirits to reaffirm the leaders’ links with them and to reassert their trust in the spirits. All adepts should support the leader who first initiated them into Zar at this time, with money, food for the ceremony, and/or with service as the event is prepared. On the evening of the opening day, the offerings are carefully counted and organized, and then these (also known as Chair or *kursi*) are on public display as the whole assembly of spirits is summoned to the ceremony with intense drumming and song. The event usually lasts three or seven days (recurrent numbers in Zar), and during that time special refreshments are prepared for the so-called Old or Great spirits in turn: the Darawish are offered dates, the Pashawat are presented with trays of sweet snacks and juices, while the Khawajat are offered a mesa, a table of mixed foreign foods,

¹⁹ Ahmad al-Badawi’s life remains obscure, but he spent time in Mecca and other parts of the Muslim world before finally settling in Tanta, Egypt, where he established a school of followers (Mayeur-Jaouen 2018). His continuing veneration was to annoy the Ottoman rulers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but their opposition did little to diminish his stature in Egypt, where he is remembered as “a deliverer from all troubles” (Gibbs and Kramers 2001, 22–23).

²⁰ Karrar (1992, 120–21) describes this as an offshoot of the Khalwatiyya order. In 1781–2, Ahmad al-Tijani declared he had received Prophetic permission to initiate others.

²¹ In Zar, this line of descent is more commonly compared to a housepost, the central pole which supports the lean-to or simple room in which Zar activities continue to be held. In contrast to a chain (*al-silsila*), a housepost evokes both the domestic domain AND the essential importance of this supporting trunk. Linking members are referred to in maternal kin terms.

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including cheeses, tinned corn beef (bully-beef), and, at least formerly, alcoholic drinks.²² The food made of the sacrificed animal(s) is served to the whole community of spirits and adepts towards the end of the ceremony.

Sacrifice in Zar is also distinctive. Based outwardly on the Islamic sacrifice, a trained male butcher must be invited to perform the actual slaughter. In other ways, however, sacrifice in Zar is distinct. Firstly, the type of animal sacrificed is carefully chosen: pigeons or chickens for an initial consultation in Zar, sheep for most other thanksgiving rituals, *karamat* (including Rajab). Very occasionally, depending on the spirit to be placated, a cow is sacrificed. In all cases, the age, sex, sexual state (neutered or not), and coat colorings of the animal are of the utmost importance. The night before the sacrifice is to be made, the sacrificial animal and the sponsor of the ceremony (either the sick woman or the leader) is decorated with henna, a cosmetic particularly associated with the wedding ceremony. On the day of sacrifice, the animal, draped with suitably colored cloth, is brought into the area, *al-maidan*, where the spirits are summoned, and senior women in Zar, holding candles and dressed appropriately for the spirit being honored, process around it in a circle to increasingly intense drumming and singing. Finally the leader signals the butcher to approach and they lead the animal to the special place of sacrifice, *al-mayenga*, ritual space found in every house of Zar (Kenyon 2012, 185–8). There, as the butcher cuts the animal's throat, the leader catches the first blood to fall in a bowl and, mixing it with perfume, daubs it on adepts' foreheads or wrists.²³ The animal is then taken away to be dismembered and prepared for the subsequent feast.

Another ceremony with outward resemblances to Sufi tradition is the inauguration (“girding”) of a new leader in Zar. The ceremony is organized by local Zar leaders, including the person with whom she has trained and from whose “Box” her paraphernalia and knowledge is derived. At the culmination of the event, after a sacrifice is made at the new leader’s *mayenga* (ritual place of sacrifice), those senior leaders don clean white jalabbiyya and sashes, green (Qadriyya) or red (Badawiyya), and formally invest the new leader by folding over her shoulder the color sash of her mentor.

Also striking is the way that certain key symbols are appropriated by groups of spirits, partly as a means of establishing identity, but then inverted to challenge prevailing correctness. Three examples must suffice. Among the Pashawat spirits, the dominant accessory is the red fez or tarbush hat, which formerly identified Ottoman and Egyptian nobility and government officials. Today, each Zar leader owns several of these and hands them out freely when Pasha spirits come down. Many Pasha spirits wear them proudly as a symbol of their importance; others, however, especially in the past, acted as though the red fez gave them license to behave badly, chasing young women and fondling them inappropriately. The fez are also seized on by some of the lowly Black spirits, who wear them at a jaunty angle, mocking the very authority which the hat should bestow.

Another example of this sort of inversion are slave anklets, worn by younger, lowly female spirits, particularly Habbashiyya, spirits of Ethiopian concubines and prostitutes, and Black spirits. Outwardly a symbol of servitude, the meaning becomes increasingly muddied as anklet-clad spirits strut proudly around the maidan, dancing with increasing abandon. Today women admire the heavy accessories, apparently forgetting they were earlier markers of subordination but celebrating the freedom they bring to the newly possessed women.

²² Since the introduction of Shari'a law in 1983, foreign alcoholic beverages are no longer available in Sudan, and illegal local brews are expensive and hard to find.

²³ This is still referred to as drinking the blood of the sacrifice, something which, it is claimed, women in Zar used to do literally, and which is viewed as *haram* in Islam.

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Finally, as an example of the entanglement of religious meanings in Zar, alcohol remains a dominant symbol of Christian spirits. Most women are aware that wine is an integral element in the Church's ritual mass, which goes part of the way to explain why Christian spirits are associated with drinking alcohol. Even more obvious, the heavy drinking habits of many Europeans and Americans has been observed since colonial times and continues to be reinforced in television and film portrayals of the West. Khawajat spirits traditionally required whisky, brandy, or beer be served at their ritual meal, al-mesa, while the more lowly Black spirits—Habbashi and Ziruq—were offered local brews in formal and informal ritual. Since Shari'a law was introduced in 1983, foreign beverages are not readily available, which explains (for adepts) why Khawajat spirits rarely come any more. When one does, he is very likely to seem intoxicated, causing great hilarity among the onlookers. This mockery of the Khawajat "nation," since the establishment of the Islamic state in 1989, contrasts sharply with the increasing respect shown towards the Muslim Pashawat, whose behavior recently has been generally impeccable. Possibly what we are seeing in this polarized behavior is also a reflection of self: under the Islamic state, the individual finds a way even in Zar to demonstrate her respect for the ideals and beliefs it supposedly represents. The commentary of Zar continues to work both ways, at outsiders, or the past, for example, and at oneself.

Writing this, in April 2019, as Sudanese women lead the protests against the military and now-former regime of Omar al-Bashir, I can't help wondering how quickly these events will find their way into Zar ritual and what shifts in ritual and belief we shall be witnessing in the near future. Certainly, Zar as memory and as alternative history continues to offer vibrant insight into what is happening, even as that insight continues to challenge prevailing views.

Changes in Zar Ritual and How They Underscore Changing Attitudes to the “Other”

The twentieth century witnessed many transformations of the religious as well as the political landscape of Sudan. Under Condominium rule, Christianity became increasingly visible, with churches erected in the larger towns, Christian schools (Catholic and Anglican) enjoying high status in the capital, and missionary activity encouraged in the southern part of the country. At the same time, the leaders of the main Sufi brotherhoods were influential in politics as well as religious practice. This was the time when Zainab's Zar practice became popular in Sennar. Interestingly, the Darawish spirits did not linger in her Box, Pashawat spirits behaved badly, while Christian spirits, such as the Khawajat and even more the Black (including Habbashi) spirits, began to dominate Zar activity.

After Independence in 1956, civil war between northern and southern Sudan broke out and the two regions seemed divided primarily by religion: southern Sudan was described as Christian or animist while stricter forms of Islam enjoyed ascendancy in the north. The introduction of Shari'a law in 1983, followed by the 1989 coup that established Sudan as an Islamic state, when even southern Sudan became subject to Islamic law, led to a revival of civil war and sharpened religious tensions once again. Zar was caught up in the tension as its leaders were persecuted and ritual activity temporarily banned. By 2000, it was once more being practiced in Sennar, though with caution, as police raids were feared and curfews were still in place. This was the time when Darawish spirits started possessing women in increasing numbers—in part, no doubt, because of increased orthodoxy and piety. In the rituals of Zar, however, these spirits were quite likely to be treated with mockery and amusement (Kenyon 2012, 96–97),

and they were certainly not welcomed with the same enthusiasm as (for example) the lowly female spirits. The brazen way the latter flaunted their jewels, seductive dress, and sensual dances stood in striking contrast to the public dress codes presently being enforced by the Islamic government.

Such shifts in the spirit panoply seems to parallel Sudan's changing role in the world. Today, some individual spirits no longer appear, while new spirits (and symbols) come down regularly. These newcomers fit uneasily into existing categories. The term Khawajat, for example, was formerly used broadly for light-skinned foreigners, though in Sennar it referred primarily to those encountered through colonialism and, as noted above, they now rarely appear in Zar. Instead today, two new sub-groups of spirits dominate the Khawaja nation, as it comes to possess new generations of Zar adepts: Chinese (*nass as-Sin*) and Indians (*al-Hinud*). These developments reflect both changing political realities and the impact of television. Many young Sudanese now study in China or India, Chinese aid projects have been welcomed by the Islamist state, while Bollywood movies have long been widely enjoyed during the month of Ramadan.

Pasha spirits have fluctuated even more. When I first met them, in 1980, they presented an ambiguous group. On the one hand, several were serious and assertive; on the other, some individuals could be unpleasant and unpredictable, causing the leader of the ritual much stress as she tried to control their wayward behavior. Today that waywardness seems forgotten. The Pashas, good Muslims all, are particularly visible in formal Zar celebrations, reinforcing correct behavior and expecting and receiving respect and tribute from their human hosts. On occasion, they are even empowered to speak on behalf of the whole assembly, and their whispered words are listened to with alacrity and respect (Kenyon 2012, 100–101). No other nation or group of spirits has the same gravitas today as the Pashawat.

The most dramatic example of change, however, is seen in the changing roles of the three servant spirits Bashir, Luliyya, and Dasholay. In the last half-century, they have come to dominate the daily activities of Zar. They are described as half-siblings, sharing an Ethiopian mother and, as servants or even slaves of the other Zar spirits, are thus linked to the Black Zar nations, Habbashi and Ziruq. Although Zainab would have known the whole assembly of spirits as she began her successful career in Zar, these lowly spirits do not appear to have bothered her, though they may well have come to ("possess") some of her supporters. In the mid-1970s, a time of stability and economic optimism in Sudan, Bashir appeared in a dream to Zainab's granddaughter, the Umiyya Rabha, and instructed her to prepare coffee for him when he came to cure people suffering from Zar disorders every Sunday and Wednesday. His sister Luliyya also came informally to advise people on sexual and reproductive issues, and she was served Pepsi Cola in a similar sort of event.²⁴ Finally, Dasholay also started coming regularly to certain women, with the same purpose of offering advice and assistance for a nominal fee. Today, the bulk of Zar activity is linked to these three spirits. Their appearance is distinctive. Bashir and Dasholay wear jalabiyya, Bashir red and Dasholay black, with a vivid white cross on the chest. Both Christian spirits, they expect to be offered alcohol as well as coffee and cigarettes, local beers at any time but luxury foreign spirits when available. Hosts of Luliyya wear pretty, often sensuous, clothing and colorful accessories because she is known to love beautiful things and to dance. She recalls the spirit of the Ottoman concubine and prostitute, Bashir that of the effective house servant, while Dasholay (whose father was described as a

24 Luliyya treats men as well as women, though generally in a private capacity. Homosexual men particularly seek her out.

Black soldier) that of the adventurer-soldier. Unlike the profiles of most other Zar spirits, all three servant spirits are homeless, as befits those who experienced the dislocations of slavery. Yet their identities are malleable, hinting at various experiences and enabling those who seek them out to relate to events in their own pasts as well. This is the secret of their success.

The symbols associated with the servant spirits—crosses, red and black colors, anklets—all make clear their identities. It is in their behavior (no less than that of the Pashawat), however, that we gain insight into the problematic entanglements of Christianity, Islam, and possession religions. Each of the servant spirits seems free to behave in ways that challenge the propriety expected of Sudanese Muslim women, and also challenge assumptions held about the balance of cultural and religious contact since the last century. Bashir, the house servant, can be described as capricious, opportunistic, vulgar—as well as sociable and affectionate, behaving with what can seem like inappropriate familiarity with women who seek him out. He, like Dasholay, talks directly to the women who come to meet him, rather than through the medium of the Zar leader. They are both said to speak in types of dialect associated with the Black Battalions, but they can be readily understood by their clients and their advice is much sought after. Their emergence and status, as non-Muslim servants, is an affront to the existing power structure and religious orthodoxy found in Sudan today. Yet within Zar, this is where power resides. Their popularity with the general public perhaps explains the resilience and relevance of Zar at a time when it could so easily have disappeared. [38]

Conclusions

Why does the nineteenth century continue to be such a powerful template in expressing ideas about the spirit world? Physical ruptures from home, the traumas of enslavement, reinforced by subsequent pressures to reshape individual identity—such events go far to answering this question. For those forced into servitude in Egypt, the ritual spaces of Zar offered brief moments of freedom in which to remember their past, on the one hand, and to process their present, on the other. This enables other memories, other beliefs, other interpretations to persist and, in due course, to flourish. [39]

It is easy to rush to conclusions about the nature of religious contact, especially in situations of great inequality, such as slavery, when the historical record was kept by the powerful and the focus was on male subjects. What the “record” of Zar suggests is that religious transfer was far from simple. Slaves who accepted enlistment into the colonial army also accepted the condition of becoming Muslims. The record of Zar shows that this conversion was often superficial at best and was compatible with older beliefs and practices. The latter offered ritual space in which converts and their dependents were free to make less than flattering comments about their new religion and masters, to remember earlier spiritual authorities while also celebrating outward forms of the new. [40]

Yet over time the pressure to become “good” Muslims and “good” colonial subjects appear to have been partly successful. By the mid-twentieth century, few men were still involved in organized Zar activities. Many had become active in the Sufi Brotherhoods they found in Sudan, where opportunities for trance experience and an embodied type of religious experience were readily available. It was women who felt less pressure to conform; and it was they who had become dominant in Zar practice in Sudan by the twenty-first century. Clearly knowledgeable about Zar for a very long time, women have now assumed all leadership roles in [41]

Sennar Zar and make up the majority of participants. It is also women's concerns and views which account for the very mixed attitudes to both Muslim and Christian spirits today.

What can we then learn about memory from Zar? Here, too, the record is far from straightforward. Old memories have an inconvenient way of surfacing long after they appear to have been lost, and in the processing of surfacing, reflect sometimes alternative readings of past experience or insinuate awkward "truths" that are ambiguous at best. This becomes apparent in the examples discussed above. Pashawat spirits, Bashir, Dasholay, Luliyya, all speak to new generations in ways which can seem contemporary and relevant. Yet their dramatic *personae*, though grounded in the nineteenth century, allow different readings, leaving them open for alternative versions to surface later. Coming down to new adepts, Luliyya is modified by their histories and experiences, transformed through their individual memories—but her identity (which may be expressed in large numbers of women simultaneously) is authenticated by this shared past. The spirits in Sennar Zar connect firmly to a formative period in the spread of Zar in Sennar, when spiritual knowledge of Islam and Christianity could be interpreted by non-believers and outsiders alike, in a ritual space where political and social correctness was, at least temporarily, suspended.

This insight is not new. Twenty-five years ago, Fritz Kramer was making similar observations about African religious practices in art. What is striking is how recent dramatic religious shifts have only confirmed his insight.

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