



## SOCIETY

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Review

Zār :

# spirit possession ritual healing? or

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*The most well-known spirit possession in Islam is performed through Zār. The term denotes a form of spirit possession that causes illness, when the spirits descend into a person, and at the same time a healing ritual that incorporates one of the most therapeutic practices. For Zār, the human body becomes the locus, the mediator and the carrier that embodies the spirit and its culture in daily life. For that reason, Zār practices break the boundaries of strict medical and psychological interpretations, making their foundation inextricably linked with the way existence is comprehended. Therefore, Zār constitutes, first and foremost, a cultural practice determined by philosophical and traditional frameworks.*

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When supernatural forces penetrate human nature, a spiritual touch is created, drawing power from a mythical cosmology. Zār constitutes one of the most well-known spirits possession in Islam developed among folks' narratives, illustrating how contemporary experiences and past myths could be embodied at the same time.<sup>1</sup> The origin of Zār lies in the Garden of Eden, wherein Eva lived with her 30 children. At one time, according to the myth, God visited the Garden and desired to see Eva's children. Fearful of His power, Eva hid the 15 most beautiful children away from his sight. But God being almighty discovered Eva's intension. Annoyed by her actions, He decided to convert her 15 most beautiful children into invisible entities for eternity.<sup>2</sup> Via His decision, Eva's offspring were divided into two groups. The 15 that had not been hidden became the primogenitors of humanity, while the other 15 became the forefathers of an envious and malicious group of spirits called Zār. Since that time, Zār spirits permeate in humanity and contaminate it with illness and misfortune.<sup>3</sup> However, every illness is inextricably linked with its healing. Therefore, a spiritual cosmology and a ritual performance have surrounded the meaning of Zār, reflecting a dual character. On the one hand, Zār underpins a spiritual possession, where a number of spirits have the capacity to impinge on human body causing physical or psychological damage. On the other hand, it is associated with a set of rituals and healing practices through which the spirits possessions' calamity turns into wellbeing.

The beliefs around the spirit possession and ritual practices of Zār, have their roots in Northern and Eastern Africa. Through the slave trade that had been conducted during the nineteenth century, they have been transmitted in the Middle East and have been practiced in societies around the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Zār practices flourished in places such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Iran, Egypt, Kuwait, adopting characteristics from each region and its culture.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, an intensive conflation of cultural interactions, religious beliefs and socio-political situations perpetuate them. In that sense, Zār embodies different material and symbolic elements into its practices and breaks the boundaries of strict interpretations due to its intercultural influences, by making its foundation inextricably linked with the way existence is comprehended.

## **Possession and healing**

Spirits and bodies are in a perpetual correlation. Zār spirit possessions and healing rituals have the human body -the dominant source which arbitrates all actions and reflections upon the world- as their locus.<sup>5</sup> Spirit possession constitutes an embodied process, which is generated in the bodies of human hosts. It collides with practicality, rationality and real time of human life. Therefore, the human body becomes the locus, the mediator and the carrier, namely the vehicle through which spirits can be held in focus.

According to research, Zār is mainly associated with women, becoming most common among poorest people of low education and rural origin, and reproduced during stressful life events such as marital dissatisfaction, child-loss and interpersonal conflicts.<sup>6</sup> The possession does not constitute an option for the individual, but instead it is obtained or inherited usually from mother to daughter and has mainly sexual motives.<sup>7</sup> The spirits -according to the myth- attack at night, when the individual is alone, prone to certain situations, and subject to socio and psychological pressure. The change in a person's behavior and personality signifies that a supernatural intervention has been incorporated in the human body by capturing the mind and disturbing its physical health. At the time that the individual is possessed, Zār takes control over the person and communicates through his/her body.

Under the possession of Zār spirits, wherein the individual experiences a physical cri-

sis and mental confusion, a number of people perceived themselves as guides attempting to heal the person. During this moment, Zār possession is transfigured into a healing ritual performance. The core of healing ritual constitutes a sacrificial rite practiced during the lifespan of Zār members that among others, incorporates songs, dancing and a state of trance.<sup>8</sup> While Zār has been transformed through cultures, traditionally, the healing ritual is performed by an old-school healer with wide diagnostic and treatment skills or by a former patient that knows how to control the attacks and has developed these skills into a healing profession. The healer, by talking to spirits in a respectful way, naming them Mashāyikh (Masters) and Asyād (Lords), tries to track down Zār's identity and to discover the reason behind the possession. Then, he/she attempts to please the spirit's demands through promises of gifts and negotiations, focusing on giving the spirit whatever it desires. Through the healing ritual and the negotiation process, the spirit possession transforms into something positive in an attempt to originate an expressive relationship with them which would withdraw the harm inflicted upon.<sup>9</sup>

### **Zār as a cultural practice**

The prism of understanding and explanation around Zār shares a multifarious character. Among different academic fields, Zār processes have been associated with psychogenic responses to extended psychosocial stressors, mainly in individuals prone to Dissociative Disorders.<sup>10</sup> While outside its cult, Zār possession can be perceived as a symptom of more serious mental problems, in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR), Zār is addressed as a culture-bound syndrome, depicting how a cultural group experiences and communicates problematic behaviors.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, besides the explanations that have been developed, Zār illustrates first and foremost a cultural practice, which incorporates all the social-political and cultural affections of the world. The practices and beliefs that surround Zār have been developed into an overall cultural phenomenon that is mirrored in people's habits such as fortune-telling stories, coffee rituals (bunna), traditional celebrations and films.<sup>12</sup> They have been incorporated into the daily life depicting a hierarchical society -wherein their myth was created- performing another way through which the 'othering' is experienced. Therefore, phenomena such as spirit possessions, stemming from folk narratives and beliefs as parts of the tradition and folkway are culturally perceived and explain ill behavior through social, psychological and traditional factors. They incorporate interpersonal and social processes that are culturally oriented and determined by philosophical and traditional frameworks. Hence, Zār spirit possession and healing ritual do not only consist a psychological disorder or a cultural syndrome, but mainly traditional practices incorporated in the Middle East cults.

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