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This important work of ethnography and interpretive anthropology by the Canadian anthropologist Janice Boddy contributes significantly to our knowledge of the zar cult, to the anthropology of Muslim Arabic-speaking Sudanese people and more generally to the study of the Middle East, as well as to the anthropology of women and gender. It is an elegant and sophisticated piece of scholarship and writing, that uses a number of current anthropological and critical approaches, and builds explicitly on much work on possession trance in particular in the zar cult, that has been produced especially in the last quarter century. These earlier studies provide Boddy both with a basis for comparison of ethnographic features and with partners in ongoing discussions over the significance of the phenomena under study.

Boddy's book is based on two periods of fieldwork, predoctoral in 1976-77 and post-doctoral eight years later, in the pseudonymous village of "Hofriyat." This time difference allowed her among other things to observe culture change in the intervening years, in particular the greater Islamization of the country and the village and a degree of Westernization, both in part due to the major influence of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, brought to the village by large numbers of local men going to work in those countries. Of particular importance is the impact of television, mostly of Egyptian programs.
The zar cult is a possession trance cult spread over a region extending over Somalia, Ethiopia, and Egypt as well as Sudan, with some instances reported from as far away as Saudi Arabia and Southern Iran. It appears not only among Muslim but also Christian and pagan peoples, and is related to bori among the Hausa. It also has affinities with possession trance cults among neighboring East African peoples. There are some parallels, and perhaps links, between zar and West African, and indeed Afro-American possession trance religions. As such, Hofriyatı zar is an exemplar of a widely distributed phenomenon, and though not all interpretations or descriptive details are applicable throughout the area, they are nevertheless suggestive.

Boddy’s study will stimulate future research along similar lines.

The great majority of participants in the zar cult, in Hofriyat, as elsewhere, are women. The spirits are associated with illness and initiation is intended as cure. Much of the illness for which redress is sought from the spirits is linked to reproductive and/or marital problems. Boddy provides figures from both study periods in support of this: In both years only less than 10% of possessed women had neither type of problem, whereas among the non-possessed this was true of 37% (1977) and 26% (1984). Since the spirits oppose biomedical treatment, Boddy is not able to furnish diagnoses for the presenting symptoms, nor does she venture diagnoses in terms of psychogenic disorders, although such interpretations are implied at various points. In any event, the curing aspect of zar is at best of secondary concern for the author.
Boddy is more directly interested in the lives of the women as set forth in her ethnographic descriptions and possession histories, and in the role the Zār cult performances play as, in some sense, analogous to Western satirical allegories. As an Islamic society, Hofriyat, and Sudan, is formally a patriarchal and patrilineal society, with power vested in men and preferential marriage is of the patrilateral parallel cousin type. The closer the marriage the better. As a result, genealogies show strong matriilateral as well as patrilateral links. Young couples frequently reside in the wife's family home until the birth of the first child, and wives may return to live with their mothers when their husbands are absent. Because many men leave the village for work, whether in cities or abroad, "women comprise two-thirds of the adult population of the village, master more than half of village ceremonies, and are often de facto heads of households" (p. 5). This, then, is largely a female community, where women live mostly among women and, even more than prescribed in this sex-segregated society, women and men spend most of their lives apart.

An important feature of women's lives is so-called "Pharaonic circumcision." Although an ancient practice, Boddy notes, no evidence of it has been found on mummies. The most severe form has been modified in recent years and midwives, who practice it, now use local anesthesia, surgical sutures and antiseptics. The internal genitalia are cut out and girls are infibulated. Women are reinfibulated after each childbirth. In 1984 Boddy found that men returning from Saudi Arabia were opposed to this excision operation, to the shock of local women.
Boddy argues that pharaonic circumcision is part of a larger symbolic complex that involves the social construction of women. "Pharaonic circumcision is a symbolic act which brings sharply into focus the fertility potential of women by dramatically deemphasizing their sexuality. In insisting on circumcising their daughters, women assert their social indispensability...as the mothers of men" (p.55).

In the zār cult women embody spirits that are males, or female prostitutes and members of various alien groups. The ritual itself can be seen as a parody of the wedding, the central ritual of Hofriyat life, and which is also partially reenacted in rituals surrounding birth and both male and female circumcision.

Boddy's tracing of symbols and themes in the zār cult is both rich and suggestive. Arguing against those who claim that possession trance cults, whatever their therapeutic value, do not lead patients, or participants, to insight, she writes: "possession, like anthropology, is a reflexive discourse; through it, Hofriyat women might step outside their world and gain perspective on their lives" (p.354, emphasis added). They might indeed, but little evidence is given that some of them actually do. In fact, Boddy tells us that initially she was frustrated, "plagued," by the circular and trivial explanations villagers offered. And she does say that the interpretations are her own. They are always interesting and suggestive as readings of a text. Clearly, for these women, zār allows the enactment of roles of "others": spirits, males (or prostitutes), aliens. It takes them outside the confines of their village lives. It may be helpful; the rituals are polysemic and rich in allusions.

Only a limited account of Boddy's complex argument is here possible.