INTRODUCTION: HEALING OF THE SPIRIT IN ABYSSINIAN CULTURE

In a number of diverse parts of the globe, observers have noted that healing cults often require the active cooperation of the patient. Even when patients have not previously been initiated in the mysteries of the cult, information has usually trickled down to them during normal enculturation and the patient thus knows something of the performance expected of him when he "falls ill." Indeed, his first task in the new role of patient is often to demonstrate his sickness, e.g., spirit-possession, so that society in general will accept him in this role.

An elaborate process of this kind is found in the "zar" cult of northern Ethiopia. The center of the cult is in the town of Gondar, on the highland plateau. There the major zar doctors have their headquarters and their societies of chronic patients (devotees).

Symptoms of possession by the zar spirits include proneness to accidents, sterility, convulsive seizures, and extreme apathy. The healer is himself zar-possessed, but has "come to terms" with the spirit. His first task is to diagnose what specific spirit or syndrome of spirits ail the patient.

Everyone in the culture knows the procedure that follows: The patient will be "interrogated" in the house of the doctor. There the doctor will lure his own zar into possessing him in a trance, and through his intercession try to lure the unknown zar of the patient ("his horse") into public possession. Then the spirit will be led to reveal his identity by means of adroit cajolery, promises, and threats. The demands of the zar will be negotiated through a lengthy process of financial dickering. Finally, the patient will be enrolled, for the rest of his life, in the "zar society" of fellow-sufferers, renting, as it were, his temporary freedom from relapse through regular donations and by means of participation in the worship of the spirit.

The patient knows this, too, and responds to the doctor's questions, though often only after a considerable show of resistance. The latter is attributed to the activity of certain mischievous minor spirits, whose only power is to create confusion. The zar's identity is revealed by the patient's "individual" zar dance ("gurri"), which the spirit obliges his human "horse" to perform publicly while the doctor watches and directs.

The chronic patient finds many benefits as a member of the zar society. He calls attention to himself as an individual and may rise in social status in the family or community. Most patients are married women who feel neglected in a man's world in which they serve as hewers of wood and haulers of water, and
where even the Coptic Abyssinian Church discriminates against females by closing the church building to them. Married women in the predominantly rural culture are often lonely for the warmth of kinship relations, for typical residence is in an exogamous patrilocal hamlet. Members of the lower classes, such as the Muslim (mostly Sudanese) minority, find social contact across religious barriers in the zar cult. Ex-slaves, many of them descended from alien African tribes (“Shanqalla”), are also admitted to full membership in the zar cult. Finally, occupational and economic benefits are dispensed by the zar doctor, who also functions as treasurer of the society but does not render any financial accounting. Thus he has the opportunity, rare on the simple material level of traditional Abyssinia, to accumulate capital which he invests in economic enterprises (e.g., brewing honey-wine) and which further enhances the reputation of his special powers.

Active opposition to the cult comes from husbands who fear the sexual and economic emancipation of the wife. Although there are no orgies of the kind assumed and suspected by outsiders, membership in the zar cult does give opportunity for liaisons. Passive resistance comes from priests of the Coptic Abyssinian Church, who profess to condemn the zar cult but do little to counteract it. This may be because many priests secretly believe in the cosmology of zar themselves, particularly in spirits that are regarded as Coptic Christian (others are “Muslim” or “pagan”).

In the Abyssinian calendar, the most active period for zar activity is the 9-month dry season, beginning when the spirits escape from the confinement of cold rains and the landscape blossoms forth. The major zar celebration occurs just before the “little rains” which coincide with the onset of the Coptic Lent.

INDIVIDUAL VULNERABILITY AND ZAR COSMOLOGY

Every human being is considered potentially vulnerable to being possessed by a zar spirit or spirits. But humans differ considerably in degree of vulnerability, and certain situations are considered particularly inviting to the zars. Most of these situations are points of psychological or social stress.

Heredity, usually mother to daughter (paralleling the dominant patrilineal principle in Abyssinian culture) predisposes some victims. Some mothers even promote this transfer deliberately, if the individual zar has been turned into a powerfully “protective spirit” (“weqabi”); they do this by promising continued devotion.

A sort of psychic predestination is responsible in other cases. Persons are “chosen” by the zar for their melancholy natures or weak personalities (e.g., alcoholics). In some cases the illness plays the role of a religious revelation, which “calls” the chosen into the zar cult.

In this connection it is interesting to note that not only weaknesses create points of stress that attract a zar. Some zar spirits choose their victim for unusually attractive qualities, e.g., the beauty of a woman or the enchanting voice of a chorister (“däbtära”).
Natural situations which attract a zar include geographical spots, especially the bush where the spirits have their abode. There they ride wild beasts, milk them as "cattle," and protect them from hunters.

Human situations which attract certain zars feature elements of cross-sexual persecution. In many cases the spirit is regarded as having sexual intercourse with his human victim of the opposite sex. A woman who sleeps alone renders herself vulnerable to a male zar. A man who sleeps alone and has a seminal emission blames it on a female zar. The convulsive seizures of a male patient are commonly regarded as evidence that a female zar is experiencing sexual climax with him. Similarly, when a woman patient cannot readily be coaxed out of her state of apathy, it is thought she is sleeping with a male zar.

The Abyssinian myth of the origin of the zar spirits is probably a superimposed rationalization. They are regarded as having originated in the Garden of Eden, where Eve had given birth to thirty children. One day the Creator came to visit and began to count the children. In apprehension, Eve hid the fifteen most beautiful and intelligent ones; as punishment, they were condemned to remain always hidden, nighttime creatures. Consequently, they envy their uglier and weaker human siblings who are children of the light.

The world of these hidden zar spirits mirrors Abyssinian feudal and ethnocentric society. Some zars are powerful lords, others serve them as retainers. Some zars are classified as "rich man's zar," others as "poor man's zar." Coptic Christian spirits are regarded as superior in social standing and education to Muslim or "pagan" spirits. Those who have their abode on the highland plateau of Abyssinia, home of an ancient literate culture, are regarded as superior to zars whose home is among the lowland, Sudanese, and ex-slave tribes.

One intellectual zar is credited with having taught mankind the use of fire and cooking, by lending from his own flame atop a rock that juts out from the Red Sea. He and some other benevolent zars can be persuaded to teach healing medicines.

THE PRACTITIONER

Such potential benevolence is utilized by the zar doctor. Once a patient himself, he has learned to control the situation and has turned it into a profession, but both he and ordinary possessed are referred to by the same term ("bala zar").

To become a recognized doctor, he must have certain talents. One is the ability to cultivate a stare that can calm cases of hysteria. Another is linguistic ability, for he often speaks in "zar language" which Abyssinians regard as a completely different, esoteric language, but which is actually an argot composed of deformed Amharic (the major of the three main Abyssinian languages), paraphrases, and foreign loanwords. Before he begins practice, the zar doctor identifies himself more and more with the most powerful of the spirits possessing him, so that he can use this power against the lesser, mischievous ones. In his name he opens a "coffee-tray" ("gända") in his own house, symbolizing the altar of the cult.
Female zar doctors almost always claim professional sanction through transfer of power and knowledge from their mothers. This is paraphrased as "transferring the monkey." In order to compensate for the lack of inheritance, male zar doctors often substitute a myth of contagion. They may claim that they had been kidnapped by zar spirits during childhood and released in adolescence, and they make arrogant and extravagant claims more often than do female doctors. Confronted with the technological superiority of the "European," the male doctor may try to reduce the effect by claiming that only the night before he had magically visited the stranger's homeland and is familiar with all his gadgets. Male doctors often dress like old-time Abyssinian warriors, and like them anoint the hair so that it stands up stiffly. By contrast, female zar doctors, often regarded as superior to male ones, rarely show arrogance. When not in a violent trance, they usually assume the phlegmatic composure of the Abyssinian noblewoman. This was the usual poise of Woyzäro (Lady) Sällämtew, chief zar doctor at Gondar in 1953–54, although she was of low-class descent.

Thus, in the traditional form of the zar cult, it was mainly the doctor who improved his social status. Gondar itself has only about a dozen powerful doctors, mostly female, but there are hundreds in the surrounding rural areas, lesser doctors who are usually male.

**DIAGNOSIS THROUGH DEMONSTRATION**

First aid may be given a patient by relatives. Sudden extreme apathy is regarded as dangerous, for the zar may "ride his horse to death." The patient is therefore surrounded by sympathetic kinfolk, entertained with song and dance, and promises are made to fulfill any desires. In cases of hysterical possession, which typically takes the form of wanting to run into the bush at night and mingle with the hyenas, relatives may restrain the patient with ropes. In either case, he is never left alone.

At nightfall the patient is conducted to the house of the zar doctor. The scene inside is warm with illumination, burning incense, and the assembled membership of devotees, all chronic cases themselves. A relative hands an entry gift, called "incense money," to a disciple who passes it quietly to the doctor behind a screened platform. The doctor ignores the new arrival until the spirit has taken full possession. Only then does the doctor emerge, her eyes bright and curious, her gestures commanding, for the spirit is now using the doctor as a medium. She greets her flock and orders drinks for everyone. The male reader-composer of liturgy of the zar cult intones old or new hymns of praise to the zar, accompanied by the rhythmic handclapping of the worshippers. This ritual recharges the interrogation whenever it becomes difficult.

The zar doctor pretends that she has guessed the identity of the spirit who plagues the patient, but this spirit must be made to confess publicly so that negotiations can be conducted. The patient is asked leading questions, beginning with his recent activities. If answers are not satisfactory, the patient (i.e., the zar speaking through him) is accused of lying. Gradually the answers become more satisfactory. The doctor alternately lauds and threatens the
spirit, giving the patient no rest. The latter is made to confess shortcomings such as neglect of family, of kinfolk, sometimes even of the church, and of course of the zar himself, who may have been insulted unintentionally. Finally the patient dances the individual whirl ("gurri") of his particular zar, thus identifying him through minor variations in the rapid movement which ends in temporary exhaustion. Still later the patient learns to intone the proper war-chant ("fukkara") of his spirit. Sometimes several nights are needed to achieve this final expression.

TREATMENT AND SOCIAL STATUS WITHIN THE ZAR SOCIETY

The doctor does not usually proclaim the final diagnosis until he has studied the social and economic status of the patient, for an important part of the doctor's function is to match the social class of zar with the socioeconomic class of patient. The zar of poor and low-class members usually belongs to the class of "pages serving great zars" ("wureza"). Such poor patients may work off their dues by "serving the tray." When a doctor regrets his earlier overestimate of a patient's financial position, he may "transfer" his expensive zar to another devotee better able to bear the offerings demanded.

Much of the treatment consists of negotiations with the irritating zar in order to transform him into an attitude of benevolence as "protective zar" ("weqabi"). This is done by asking him, through the mouth of the patient, what he will demand in order to reduce the frequency and severity of the patient's sufferings. Some zars have simple demands such as ornaments, new clothing, or sandals. Many zars have symbolic requests. Thus a zar whose symbol is the lion may demand that a tawny-colored goat be sacrificed at regular times.

Most zars are never exorcised. This is done only rarely, particularly in the case of female zars (whose "contracts" are regarded as unreliable) who cannot be made protective. Such exorcism is accomplished by transferring the spirit to a place near a path in the bush where he can pounce on some unsuspecting stranger. The doctor then assigns his patient another zar as a protective spirit from among the zars who are currently available in the house of the zar society and without "horses" to serve them.

THE CHANGING ZAR CULT AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

While the zar cult continues in full force in Abyssinian culture in Gondar, certain significant changes can be traced from the early 1930's when a French expedition observed it there, to the time I studied it in 1953-54.

For one thing, attempts are now made to conceal its existence from the rare foreign visitor, and in Addis Ababa the cult has been entirely suppressed.

More significant is the change in the membership, leadership, and location of the cult, even in Gondar, and the increased use made of it by low-class members to achieve upward social mobility.

In 1932 the center of the zar cult and house of the chief zar doctor was located in the "respectable" Coptic sector ("Bäata"), on top of the truncated
hill that forms the geographical center of the town. The chief practitioner was
an Amhara (dominant ethnic class of Abyssinia) woman in good standing with
the Coptic Church.

In 1953–54 the cult was centered in the old Muslim suburb (Addis Alam)
at the bottom of the hill, now a slum even by local standards. It is inhabited
largely by poor Amhara, half-Sudanese Muslims, and ex-slaves, who constitute
most of the members of the zar cult. The social benefits of the zar cult con-
tinue for them, for at dusk Amhara patients still descend the hill to participate
or consult the chief practitioner on matters of business. This chief doctor is
herself part-Sudanese, but has learned to speak the upper-class Amharic
language well. Just as twenty years ago, the doctor is a middle-aged woman and
her devotees are largely females. She has a reputation for considerable achieve-
ment both in her spiritual and business activities.

CONCLUSION

1. The “zar” is a catch-all for many psychological disturbances, ranging
from frustrated status ambition to actual mental illness.

2. Healing is in the context of a culture which is socially more highly
organized than commonly found under the “shaman” type. The zar cult thus
reveals many aspects of social structure (feudalism, position of women, and so
forth).

3. Since no patient is ever discharged as cured, the zar cult functions as a
form of group therapy. Chronic patients become devotees who form a close-
knit social group in which they find security and recognition.

4. The zar cult is not a deviant cult; its significance in maintaining the
status quo in society has traditionally been greater than improvement of social
status. By matching the social status of patient and spirit, the doctor in-
advertently functions to maintain the social structure of old Abyssinia. More-
ever, the patient must confess neglect not only of the zar but of his other
social duties as well. Once his demands have been met, the zar spirit helps the
patient to carry on his normal role in the community.

5. The motivation is now shifting toward desire for upward social mobility.
Even in the past a neglected wife could punish her husband by having her zar
extort economic sacrifices from him on threat of relapse. But now ex-slave and
low-class patients are increasingly being “chosen” by the zar. The epidemiol-
ogy of possession starts a chain of events that enables them to escape from
their social confinements.

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