

# The curious case of the disappearing Zar cult

Ahmed Yousif Ali\*

Hayat Rehabilitation Center, Khartoum, Sudan

## ABSTRACT:

The reliability and validity of psychiatric categories and diagnoses are regularly reviewed and revised, some new entities are added and some removed. Over the decades since the two main international classification systems (DSM & ICD) were adopted, these exercises have been repeated time and time again. Zar is one such diagnoses appearing briefly in DSM IV-TR and is no longer included in the current classification systems of mainstream psychiatry. The names of this spirit possession suggests that many of the cults are historically related, although evidence has not directly addressed this claim. This is interesting when we consider the existence of the cult in a range spanning from Iran, Kuwait in the Arabian gulf in the east all the way to Nigeria in the west. This has led to suggestions that the origins of the cult could be from either end of the range (WHO 2021).

**Keywords:** Psychological trauma, Disaster psychology, Traumatic stress, Addiction behaviors

## INTRODUCTION

**Definition:** Zar is a possession ceremony for these spirits. (Okasha, 1966) (Opler, 1959)

- It is also the name given to the ceremony required to pacify spirits known interchangeably as Zar, Dustur and alriha alahmar (Lewis, 1971)
- These possessive entities enslave the afflicted who obeys their orders and wishes, giving rise to the symptoms and behaviors and may last for life.

- Etymology of the word is assumed to originate from the word Ziyara or visit in Arabic (Zenkovsky, 1930). It also means, became visible when Zanar is the name (WHO 1993).
- The names of this spirit possession suggests that many of the cults are historically related, although evidence has not directly addressed this claim. This is interesting when we consider the existence of the cult in a range spanning from Iran, Kuwait in the Arabian gulf in the east all the way to Nigeria in the west. This has led to suggestions that the origins of the cult could be from either end of the range (WHO 2021).
- Studies show that Zar clients are predominantly females of middle age. The exception is the Amhara tribe of Ethiopia and Iran where males predominate (Williams et al 2013).
- The word is also believed to be the name of the Supreme divinity of the Pagan Kushites of Ethiopia, called adjar.
- Zar prototypes include symptoms of blindness, paralysis, deafness, seizures and many other dissociative or conversion symptoms.

## ZAR IN CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS

The two main diagnostic systems used by psychiatrists worldwide, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric association & the International Classification of diseases (ICD) of the World Health Association have had a complicated relationship with Zar Diagnosis. Each of them dealt with possession and trance phenomena differently. Below is a summary of

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\*Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to: ahmed.ali@nrc.gov.ae

that complexity: In the DSM-IV-TR, Zar was included as a culture-bound syndrome (CBS).

- A culture-bound syndrome was defined as a

Conversion disorders, on the other hand, are conditions in which the person experiences physical and sensory symptoms like paralysis, blindness, deafness or seizures without apparent underlying neurological causation.

### **THE CULT HIERARCHY: THE SUDANESE ZAR AS AN EXAMPLE.**

It is useful to remind ourselves that possession phenomena are universal and are not confined to one part of the globe. Zar is probably the best-known spirit possession phenomena in East & North Africa and the Middle East. It is a remarkable coping strategy for people struggling with psychosocial complexities, especially women in these parts of the world (predominance among women is well documented). Zar has apparently been modified over many centuries to fit with the changing times, religious beliefs, historical and cultural transformations. Sudanese Zar is thought to have originated in Ethiopia, Egypt or Nigeria. It could have spread eastwards with pilgrims to Mecca and the Arabian Gulf and as far as Iran but the direction of its spread is not settled. It is interesting to note that when Mohamed Ali Pasha's army invaded Sudan in 1821, the returning army may have taken Zar along with the women taken as slaves and harem back to Egypt. (Brenda Seligman, 1965) There are two types of Zar, Tambura and Zar Bori in Sudan (Akasha & Umama, 1994). Zar Bori may be practiced at the Shaikha's (the leader) house or at the house of the possessed and the spirit is considered masculine. Tambura can only be performed at the Shaikha/ Tambura's house and the spirit is regarded as feminine (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

### **THE CEREMONY**

The ceremony itself consists of rituals that are fascinating to analyze. One can see remnants of pagan or religious practices. Some are forbidden and taboo in the culture (e.g., drinking alcohol or blood, sacrificing animals etc. Ceremony has distinct parts of preparation, the event itself and the follow up. The ceremonies and rituals practiced based on the concept that the possessing spirit can be negotiated with, pacified or convinced to leave the afflicted, it is no different to the expectations from Shamans and medicine men. Zar routines follow a regular pattern with a preparation phase, initiation and induction after assessment, opening the box to determine which spirit is possessing the client and finally the ceremony starts. Once induced the client is expected to be a fellow or follower of the cult for life and may need boosters every now and then, depending on their need.

**PREPARATION PHASE:** Usually the possessed or boosters approaches the Zar leader or someone does so on their behalf. demands material favours such as jewellery, new clothes, or expensive food, which the leader is expected to provide. supernatural causes, like sorcery (amal) or the evil eye (ain harra). The candidate is then isolated sometimes the symptoms may be attributed to separated from others till an assessment is made to be incorporated.

### **ASSESSMENT, INITIATION AND INDUCTION:**

The person approaches the leader of the cult and must be accompanied by a relative or friend. The entry into the house of the leader has an etiquette and obligations of respect such as entering bare footed, kissing the leader's forehead, shoulders, hands & feet. The leader (male or female Shaikh or shaikha or Umiya or mama) makes an assessment. The leader then makes an assessment and makes an initial.

**OPENING THE BOX:** The person seeking help is now alone with the leader. A box "diagnosis" containing 4 colored pots is opened and incense is put in each pot and burned. The red pot supposedly corresponds with Ethiopian spirits (Loolia or Loola). The white pot is for Muslim and the black for Christian spirits. The last is multicolored for the other spirits. The leader patiently keeps an eye on the client to observe their emotions and if there is an indication or a response to a specific box like sweating or fear or crying, then he makes the recommendation and the diagnosis of possession is made. The ritual date is set and all the process is started. The leader can use other means to identify possession like taking a piece of clothing and keep it under his pillow waiting for a guiding dream or plays some songs and observes the response of the possessing spirit.

### **ONE, THREE OR SEVEN-DAY CEREMONIES:**

Depending on the financial ability of the client the ceremony is prescribed either a one day (Yawmia, meaning day), 3-day (Taspeera, meaning patience) or 7- day full ceremony. The day before the event the client applies Henna to both hands eye on the 1st day before the event the client

Table 1 The classic 7 boats or Zar spirits that commonly possess people. As shown in table 1, there are 7 common spirits and they are expected to inhabit the box. However, there are slight variations which could be regional or

societies. It showed a remarkable ability to absorb and accommodate cultural, religious and ethnic diversities and stood the test of time. This is coming to an end and it is vanishing quickly under pressures in modern times as it is under pressure from the medical model of dis-ease and legislations banning it in many countries and other factors pertaining to dynamics in societies from urbanization and our modern ways of life. The wealth it is leaving behind should be studied and documented. It has helped mankind to heal and leaves legacies in folklore, psychodrama, music and songs that continue to inspire and even utilized by some societies as entertainment.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author does not have any existing conflict of Interest