

The Magickal Middle Eastern “ZARR” Ritual for Female Empowerment and Catharsis

Middle Eastern Culture is not what has been popularly portrayed to us through our mass media in the west. In good society, women are very well educated and revered if somewhat over protected. Breaking the bonds of this overprotection is a ritual of female empowerment. The purpose of the ritual is for the woman to experience a cathartic emotional release and throw off any repression. It also alters her state of consciousness and can connect her directly with the female aspects of the divine called *Fatima*.

It is an Islamic anomaly, indeed the origins of this ritual appear to come from pre-Islamic Turkish and East African shamanic customs, as it is a magickal ritual in which women openly imbibe alcohol, and trans-gender women take on the role of leaders and safeguards. Men are only permitted in the circles as percussionists, drummers and musicians.

This forces us to re-examine many of our dogmatic beliefs about Islam. Muslims commonly believe in magick. Divination and magick are commonly used in the Islamic world and include fertility magick, warding off the evil eye, the production of amulets and other magickal equipment, conjuring, casting lots, astrology and physiognomy. They are only forbidden the practice of *Sihir*, which means black magick in Arabic. There is an accepted differentiation between practising light and dark magick. While *Sihir* is forbidden, the practise of light magick uses prayers and verses from the Quran to achieve results. An example of this is writing verses from the Quran with ink on white porcelain, washing the ink off with holy water and having the patient drink the water-ink mixture. The knowledge of which verses of the Quran to use, what style of calligraphy, what type of ink, what day and time, is considered “pious magickal knowledge.”

Part of the empowerment of this ritual is derived, for each individual woman, if she can contact her own personal Jinn or Genie, which in the west is referred to as contacting your higher-self, Atman or Holy Guardian Angel. Islamic magickal practitioners commonly seek the help of their familiar Jinn in magick. Belief in jinn is a general part of the Muslim faith. "*Allah created the angels from light, and created the jinn from the pure flame of fire...*"

The Zarr Types

The Zarr is a well-known therapeutic practice throughout the northern Sudan. The Zarr is considered a propitiatory ceremony to appease the suppressed anger and wrath within a woman by means of lavish feasting, rhythmic music, gifts, and ritual movement specific to the ritual in the same way that the swirling dance is central to Sufi ceremony.[2] The Zarr, also known as *Midans* or *Dastur*, is exclusively for adult women. Few men appear in these ceremonies. Those who do are invariably extremely effeminate or transsexual. Children do not participate. These rituals are fun and the Zarr becomes a closed fellowship of strongly empowered females within the community.

As with any ancient ritual, there are variants. There are two main variants of this ritual. In both types of Zarr, there are some vestiges of its past animist origins and there are common elements: -

1. Food is offered to the divine thrice before any participants can eat.
2. Alcohol is used in both types of the Zarr.
3. The *Shaikha* or transsexual ritual leaders anoint all women by making a small cross with wine and holy oil on their foreheads.
4. Cross-dressing for the women is common but not mandatory but the transsexual shaikhs leaders wear distinctively unique costumes.
5. Men are the almost exclusive players of drums and other percussion instruments.
6. Women are the dancers and the ones receiving healing
7. Each woman brings a gift to give to another woman in the circle.

The main variants are:

- ✪ **The Zarr Bori**, in which women freely choose the time, the place, and the duration of the ceremony, the festivities are healing in nature and the shaikha may perform a tin divination.
- ✪ **The Zarr Tumbura** is the more ancient.[3] The Tumbura Zarr is well organized. The day and time the ceremonies are held is always between Thursday evening and Friday noon and cannot be changed to suit. The shaikh performs sleep divination on a pile of the attending women’s clothing usually being shawls or scarves brought along for this purpose. The Tumbura ceremonies are more a celebration than a healing. Transsexuals, effeminate men or overt homosexuals who appear frequently in the Bori, are almost unknown in the tumbura.

For this event, we shall perform the Zarr Bori

The Zarr Ceremony Elements

Zarr Ceremonies are well prepared, and a touch theatrical. The scene is set setting for what is essentially a dancing séance.[4] Everyone crowds into a room that is filled with strongly scented incense and perfumes. All dress in their best clothes. The dancing begins with a swaying slow shuffle; rhythmic clapping and a chest thrusting movement in a slow circle around a central fire, whist wine and food are passed around.

When the women feel moved they will fall to their knees and swing their unbound hair back and forth or around in rhythmic circles. Altered states of consciousness, trances and sometimes an emotional release of tears or wailing are achieved. This is a delicate and highly prized healing state. It is the ritual leaders job to maintain the safety of the individual in the group if they cathart or trance out and to provide comfort and safety through any catharsis. The atmosphere of the ritual space is ripe for catharsis as it provides an appreciable degree of over stimulation. This also can move some to dance to the point of psychic and physical exhaustion and here again the feelings of trust, comfort and safety provided by the transsexual leaders is of great importance and can also produce individual healing. Women have frequently reported that they have been completely oblivious of their surroundings and have felt no pain whatsoever from any pre-existing conditions during portions of the ritual. Emotional release leaves them with a feeling of peace, unburdened freedom, weightlessness, safety, protection and space inside. In addition, many report union with the divine.

Zarr Music

Traditional Zarr music is a vital ritual element.

See a clip of Zarr trance music performed here - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ffydji7CaI>

On the night, drummers will be required to play along with canned traditional music for this ritual. Loud, rich rhythm, repetitive to the point of monotony, in order to induce trace, is the hallmark of Zarr music. It has a definite start, a clear progression, and a finale. The music sentence is brief in form, and is repeated. The melodies are all based on the pentatonic scale. It works up to a pitch of excitement. The emotional tension of the dancers builds up, until one or more falls down to her knees swinging her hair or enters trance. Then the tempo is slowed down then is finally stopped abruptly

Healing

Healing is a by-product of the Zarr ritual for women from all walks of life. Healing resulting from Zarr rituals has been documented by the investigative medical community in cases of stress, depression, marriage crises, fertility, childbirth, the death in the family, functional psychoses, hysteria, psychosomatic diseases, phobic and organic neuroses, social stresses and strains, some organic brain syndromes, epilepsy, schizophrenia, affective disorders, puerperal psychosis, obsessive compulsive neurosis, a host of bodily and psychic diseases, spirit possession and inner troubles. [7, 10,11,12,13] Jean Buxton says,

this ritual may lead to a relaxed semi-hypnotic state and helps to promote the free expression of worries and problems by the patient, perhaps even in some cases helping to establish telepathic communication.[15]

Pamela Constantinidis outlined many of these positive healing reactions arising from the Zarr rituals in an article entitled "Women Heal Women: Spirit Possession And Sexual Segregation In A Muslim Society," she says:

"But while men have formal control ... Men accept totally the necessity of their wives' and daughters' proper ritual passage through the life cycle. Here lie the 'inarticulate powers' of women, and here, I would claim, lies the proper province of the Zarr cult."[8]

References

- [1] Geister, Magier und Muslime. Dämonenwelt und Geisteraustreibung im Islam. Kornelius Hentschel, Diederichs 1997, Germany
- [1b] Magick and Divination in Early Islam (The Formation of the Classical Islamic World) by Emilie Savage-Smith (Ed.), Ashgate Publishing 2004
Retrieved from "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asian_witchcraft"Category: Witchcraft
- [2] Zar is an ambivalent word that indicates both the name of the possessing spirits and the propitiatory ceremonial dances performed to appease them.
- [3] Tigani Al-Mahi. Zar Archetypes in the Sudan: 1937-68. (manuscript in possession of Dr. Ahmad Al Safi).
- [4] Dancing is a popular activity in Sudanese life. It is part of almost all festivities, especially those associated with various initiation rites. It is also part of the religious remembrance liturgies or zikr. It is seen as a recreational activity, a means for keeping fit, and an activity that enhances group interaction and body awareness. The kampala dance performed by the Nuba is an excellent example of a dance fulfilling these all-embracing functions.
- [5] Ahmad Al-Safi, Samira Amin, Abd Allah Muhammad Abd Allah. Zar in the Sudan. Arabic (in press). 1989.
- [6] Tigani Al-Mahi. Al-Rayyid La Yakdhib Ailahu: Tahliil Al-Haya Al-Nafsiyya lil Maraa Al-Sudaniyya [Arabic]. Majallat Al-Sudan Al-Jadid; 23 June 1944: pages 6, 19.
- [7] The late Psychiatrist Hasabu Sulaiman circulated and popularized in the daily newspapers and television interviews the term 'hysterionic' as a label for these patients.
- [8] Constantinidis, Pamela M. Women Heal Women: Spirit Possession and Sexual Segregation in a Muslim Society. Social Science & Medicine; 1985; 21(6): 68:685-692.
- [9] Buxton, Jean C. Religion and Healing in Mandari. Oxford: The Clarendon Press; 1973. Pages 114, 298.
- [10] Rahim, S.I.A. Clinical Analogues of Zar in Sudan. In: The International Symposium on the Spiritual Dimension of Traditional African Medicine; January 1988: Traditional Medicine Research Institute, Institute of African and Asian Studies, Khartoum and International African Institute, London.
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- [12] Constantinidis, Pamela M. Women Heal Women: Spirit Possession and Sexual Segregation in a Muslim Society. Social Science & Medicine; 1985; 21(6): 68: 685-692.
- [13] Nadel assumes that many shamanistic performances are genuine cases of hysterical dissociation, and raises the question of how far we must assume the existence of a specific psychological predisposition in the groups where this form of mental instability plays so prominent and socially attractive a part. Nadel 1946.

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Whilst this author's research is impeccable we do not subscribe to many of his views including it being a possession cult

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