One Fragment of the Ethnographic Picture of Egypt (Zār Ceremony)

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Abstract The Egyptian Zār ritual is a ceremony that includes different aspects of ethnographic picture; it is possible to study it from the viewpoint of the linguistic, literary, musical, psychological, health and gender issues. The purpose of the ritual is to cure certain diseases by a folk method. It has found its way into Egypt from the south via Sudan. The ritual was regarded by the Government of Egypt as involving certain danger, due to which it was even prohibited. Nevertheless, it functions to the present day, it is possible to study it from the viewpoint of the linguistic, literary, musical, psychological, health and gender issues. The report focuses attention on the important details of the Zār practice, such as: 1. types of Zār, 2. Belief in the existence of the so-called Jinn and Sayids, which is the basis for the functioning of Zār, 3. composition of the group performing different types of Zār, 4. Zār diseases and those of medical character, 5. the language of Zār, in which the author of the report has singled out words and expressions that can be considered as the professional slang of Zār, 6. Amulets, 7. Types of musical accompaniment during the performance of the ceremony, as well as various details of the Zār ceremony.

Keywords Egypt, Ritual, Spirits, Illness, Amulets, Trance, Texts

In Arabic the word Zār must be of Amharic origin, deriving from the word jār [1:289; 2:10-11]. This lexeme must have found its way into Egypt and Sudan from Ethiopia. However, at the same time, jār (same as yāro, dāro [3:2]; was the main deity of the pantheon of the idolater Kush – the sky god, who then assumed another form and turned into an evil demon. This demon, according to the Ethiopians’ belief, lives in rivers, canals and in flowing water in general, and is able to make a person ill. It can be cast out of the body with the help of amulets and incantations [1:289]. Exactly these rituals became the form of the Zār ceremony which is known to us at present and which later on, from the 1860s became established in Egypt through the Sudanese and Ethiopian slave women.

Zār – the ritual which is found in Egypt to the present day implies curing of human beings of a certain group of illnesses by means of a whole series of incantations, odes devoted to jinn and other similar acts.

It should be noted that the specialist literature does not contain exhaustive information about this ritual, despite the fact that Egyptian authors have dedicated two monographs to this topic (‘Ādíl al-‘Ālínī, az-zār wa masraḥ aš-šuqūs, al-Qāhirah, 1993 and Fāṭima al-Miṣrī, az-zār, al-Qāhirah, 1975). Only fragmentary, sometimes inaccurate, information is offered in several articles published in periodicals at different times. As any manifestation of folklore, the Zār ritual is also characterized by diversity. The present article describes Zār in the form as it appeared at the beginning of the 21st century in the processions performed in the so-called ḥadāyiq al-aḥrām-territory on the outskirts of Cairo, as well as in some regions of northern as-Ṣa’īd (Upper Egypt).

1. Three types of Zār are known in Egypt: Sudanese (as-sudānī), Egyptian (maṣrī) or as-ṣa’īdi, i.e. Upper Egyptian and abū l-ġīṯ or al-ġīṯāniya. Of these the latter two varieties are Egyptian proper, originating in Egypt. These three types differ from one another in nuances, but the main motivation, basis and manner of the ceremony are identical. In the past a fourth type of Zār, the so-called rangū [4:42] occurred as well.

A distinguishing feature of Sudanese Zār is that together with percussion instruments (which are the main instruments of Zār), tambūra also sounds in it. This is a folk stringed instrument, which is not found in Zār of another type. Therefore Sudanese Zār is sometimes referred to as tambūra too.

In as-Ṣa’īdi Zār only women participate. In this case some musicians may be male, but it is prohibited for other men to attend such Zār, or to perform Zār of this type for a man. Abū l-ġīṯ (a settlement of this title is in northwestern Egypt) is one of the varieties of Zār, it is of Egyptian origin proper and the most theologized one. Instead of sayids, in abū l-ġīṯ saints (awliyā’i) are addressed and odes dedicated to them are
performed. In Zār these holy names have the same function as the names of sayids. Participants in this case are mostly men.

Zār can be one-day (yawmīya) and it may also last for 5-7 days. It may be performed by the commission of one particular person (maḥṣūṣ), or for several ill persons (al-gama‘eya).

2. According to Ḫumm Sāmīḥ (Zār practitioner), there are Zār illnesses and doctor illnesses. If an illness is a doctor’s, Zār will not prove useful in its curing, and vice versa – a doctor cannot cure it. Zār illnesses include: nervous disorders, mental illnesses, childlessness, gastric diseases, headaches, spine diseases, limiting movement, etc. Zār also helps a young girl who cannot get married, a woman who constantly miscarries, or gives birth to a dead fetus or sick children.

3. The basis of Zār is the belief in the so-called jinn and sayids – spirits, demons, who really exist and if offended by humans, they can punish the latter by an illness or a misfortune. In the Zār culture the difference between jinn and sayids is that in the Egyptian folk belief jinn are evil demons, whose enraging entails fatal results for a person, sayids are compliant and it is possible to become reconciled with them, hence, the ill person can be cured. Ḫumm Sāmīḥ, a Zār practitioner in Cairo (at the time of my contact with her, in 2004, she was 53 years old) confirms the widespread view that the total number of jinn and sayids is 44. Here is a version of their origin [2:18-19]: at the time of living in the Garden of Eden Biblical Eve had 30 children. When God ordered her to show her children, Eve hid fifteen children outstanding by their mind and appearance, and showed the other fifteen who were inferior by their mental qualities and appearance. God, of course, learned about this and damned the hidden children to be always invisible and live in the dark. The Ethiopians believe that the Zār jinn and sayids are descendants of exactly those children.

Sayids and jinn can get angry with a human being because of a specific behaviour: if a person asserts that demons do not exist, or throws something on the ground in the dark, walks in an impure place, sleeps alone, etc [2:18]. According to another Cairo informer, ‘Usāma, jinn can get angry with a person if he/she accidentally hits a jinnee or his child with an object thrown by him/her in the dark (it is regarded that jinn like to be in the dark). Therefore, before a person does something like this, he must utter a warning formula: bismi-l-lāhi-r-raḥmānir-raḥīm (in the name of Allah the gracious merciful) or a ʿūdu bīl-ḥabābīj wal-ḥabībāt (I ask permission from male and female jinn).1

The above-mentioned Ḫumm Sāmīḥ related that she never liked the song devoted to Christian sayid, as-sitt al-kibīra (or

1 Interestingly, in the expression interdental consonants are attested, which, unlike literary Arabic, are uncommon for the dialect. Literary forms usually are uttered in a conversation when citing the Koran. This means that in the imagination of the ordinary people the belief in jinn and the like and the religion are closely related concepts.
“girding”. At this time the person wishing to become a kōdiya takes a certain examination, sings odes dedicated to all sayids and performs every detail, envisaged by the Zār ceremony. Experienced women watch if everything has been performed properly, and then put a special girdle around the waist of the examinee, which means that from that moment this person has become a kōdiya.

The Zār payment and offering, asked by spirits through the kōdiya, usually depends on the material state of the family. This may be a hen or a dove and even a camel. After the kōdiya appoints the date of Zār, the family of the ill person begins to prepare for Zār.

The kōdiya is assisted in the performance of Zār by a group. It may consist of the following persons: 1. ṣādiya – the main assistant, who knows by heart every ode in honour of all spirits, and may take upon herself the entire process, but unlike the kōdiya, she cannot get into contact with jinn and sayids. An ṣādiya is often a maiden who herself has an angered sayid, or a son with homosexual inclinations, or a hermaphrodite. 2. sanjaq – in Sudanese Zār the performer of ceremonies. Like an ṣādiya, a sanjaq cannot get in touch with spirits. 3. The so-called ad-daqqaqīn – in Egyptian Zār, in which men do not participate, these women beat percussion instruments with iron sticks. Beats must be strong in order to have a more powerful impact on the patient. I have witnessed how the leather, stretched over the boards, was torn by strong beats. 4. sattrī – mangoura player. Mangoura represents goat hooves strung on leather, which are fastened to a thick leather belt. A player puts this belt around the waist and begins to move in rhythm with the movement of the hips. A sound resembling jingling is produced. 5. btā’ ūmānara – “ūmānara man”, player of the stringed instrument ūmānara.

5. From time immemorial amulets had great significance and were popular in the oriental world. In Egypt, along with amulets, widespread since the Ancient Egyptian period, surviving to the present day there are also Zār amulets proper.

A person who has lived in Egypt will have undoubtedly noticed that Egyptians seldom wear silver jewellery. They like gold. For an Egyptian woman gold is a means of capital investment. As regards Zār amulets, they are mostly made of silver, as is accepted in the tradition of some other peoples. The following are regarded as Zār amulets: bracelets, khulkhals (bracelet-like ornaments to be worn on shins), pendants, arm ornaments [5:58-59]. As Schienel [7:16-20] notes, only hand-made amulets, and not stamped ones, are valuable and “fulfill their function” in Egypt.

Coloured, garish beads, scraps of fabric also serve as amulets, which are used for decoration of the Zār instrument with the motif that coloured objects attract spirits and dispose them favourably toward humans.

6. The aim of the Zār ceremony is to put the ill person into a trance. If this is achieved, the sayid will temporarily enter his body. Aḥmad Tiṭha (about 55 years old, he did not know his exact age), narrated that at that time the patient may begin to speak in a strange, unusual voice. This will be the sayid speaking through the ill person. The trance will be followed by curing.

If a person once resorted to Zār, he is obliged to “become enrolled in the guild” of Zār and to resort again and again to the so-called karama, a ritual of a lower rank than Zār for mollifying spirits, during which only food and different objects are offered to sayids, and to order Zār performance [2:17] for himself repeatedly. Otherwise, spirits will get angry with him.

In the period preceding Zār, and especially in the Zār period, everybody shows affection towards the sick person and tries not to offend him/her. This is necessary for curing. Zār requires from a family such great expenses and efforts that, as Kenyon’s one informer notes, preparation for Zār is worse than preparation for a wedding [6:89-108]. At that time close relatives and friends of the family are invited, who are treated to sweets, nuts and various dishes. In their turn, these visitors, who are called ḥābāyib (close friends) or ṣūḥīd (witnesses) indulge the Zār patient, are affectionate and fulfill his/her every caprice.

The Ritual begins with the so-called fātiha, i.e. opening address, in which some researchers see a reflection of the Fatīha (opening sura) of the Koran. Umm Sāmini uttered the following fātiha:

“ṣīd ibrāhim ad-dasū’i, ṣīd ‘īzz ar-riggāl, al-ḥḍr war-riyyās wal-mursi abul-‘abbās yīḥdu d-duṣṣān wyiddūkī l-aḥfīyya wal-barhān biḥa” gāhīd an-nābī ‘alā ẓ-salāt wa aṣfāl as-salām. bêt az-ẓār, bêt māmmā watbā’u, rūm nagdi watbā’u, yūsuf watbā’u, abu danfa watbā’u, al-wazīr watbā’u, al-‘arabī watbā’u, as-sulṭān al-aḫmār, dir sn-naṣārī, bêt al-ḥabās, as-sīttāt: šādēyya hānim, al-ḥaḏārēyya.

ana ‘arīt al-fātiḥa bil-amān.”

“Sayid ibrahim ad-dasuqi, sayid ‘izz ar-rigal, al-khird and riyas and al-mursi abu l-‘abbas will accept fume and will give you good health and harmony, by the right granted by the prophet, to whom we pray and devote the best greetings. The Zar house is the house of mamma and his followers, rum nagdi and his followers, yusuf and his followers, abu danfa and his followers, al-gindar and his followers, al-wazir and his followers, al-‘arabi and his followers, the red sultan and his followers, dair an-nasari, the house of the Ethiopians, of ladies - sadia hanim and al-bahareyya.

So, I have uttered the fātiḥa with peace!”

This is followed by odes dedicated to one or several sayids, performed by the kōdiya and other members of the group, with very loud accompaniment of percussion instruments (sometimes together with ūmānara). These are songs intended to win the disposition of sayids. E.g. Umm Sāmini in one of her odes to al-‘arabī sang (the hyphen at the beginning denotes the syntagma of the members of the

2 Of these sayids, e.g. al-Ḥḍr is St. George, whereas imam ibrahim ad-dasuqi and some other names are known from the Islamic tradition, mursi ‘abā l-‘abbās mosque is a famous mosque in Alexandria, etc.
The rhythm of percussion instruments is more and more accelerated, then each musician approaches the ill person. Sometimes, these are simple, symmetric movements. The musicians beat percussion instruments with iron sticks at the ears of the dancing patient. Then the rhythm is violated and each musician plays with his own rhythm. Exactly at this time the patient must fall into a trance, which is not so difficult taking into account the above procedures of Zār. The question arises naturally as to whether Zār has any obvious results. It is attested that sometimes Zār indeed gives certain relief to the ill person. Behman in the work [3:23-24] notes correctly that Zār is effective in two cases: 1. if an illness is of psychological character. By way of illustration the author cites the story of a girl whose engagement failed several times. This made her think that sayids were angry with her, which led her to apathy. In a similar situation several procedures of Zār proved sufficient for curing the girl’s mental disorder. 2. When a disease is organic and its symptoms are expressed by pain. The trance as a result of Zār may cause hypnotic anesthesia and temporarily alleviate pain [3:24], which may, by the way, ultimately even entail fatal results, as due to artificial suppressing of pain the patient does not consult a doctor and the illness grows progressively worse.

7. In Egypt Zār is mostly performed in the native Egyptian dialect of the local population, but the hymns to some sayids are performed in another language. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Yūnis in the Folklore Dictionary [1:289] notes that this is the “Zār language”, which is regarded as the secret language and no one knows it except the Zār group. The Zār practitioners known to the present author avoided talking on this topic and refused to explain some phrases which were uncertain from the position of Arabic.

Even when Zār is performed in Arabic, in the Egyptian dialect, there are certain expressions which are unknown to those who are not familiar with this ritual. E.g. bêt az-zār: bêt (Arab. house), as a term, in the Zār tradition denotes the entire Zār ceremony. The phrase: bêt ez-zār talāt advār (lit. there are three floors in the Zār house) – in the Zār ceremony three types are singled out (i.e. there are three different types of Zār [9:59-60]. ḳhaggab/ḵhajjab: it is derived from the word ḳhāqāb (in Zār this is a variety of amulet) and denotes: “acquired an amulet, began to wear an amulet” [9:72]. Usually in the Egyptian dialect this word denotes that a woman began to wear a head-scarf (hejab), which is a certain rule with Muslim women. ḳhaḍra: a regular (as a rule, weekly) variety of Zār [9:74] Usually, this word in Arabic means “to attend”, etc.
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