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Silver of the possessed: jewellery in the Egyptian zār

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CAPTIONS TO THE PHOTOGRAPHS AT THE BEGINNING OF EACH CHAPTER

Chapter 1. Introduction

Old silver jewellery for sale in Cairo's Khan el Khalili. The triangular amulet box in the centre and the bracelets with dangles to the left are often associated with *zār*. Photo S. van Roode.

Chapter 2. Spirits and women in Egypt

A woman in Sohag, Egypt, 1900-1901. She wears a necklace of beads and a silver pendant. Similar disc-shaped pendants from this timeframe carry the text of the Throne Verse, images of mermaids or geometric patterns, and were believed to help protect the wearer from interference from the spirit world. Photo: Hallwylska Museet/SMH (PDM).

Chapter 3. Collected Objects

A collection of *zār* pendants. Photo S. van Roode.

Chapter 4. Living Objects

Drumming in a *candomblé* ritual, Brazil. Photo C. Silva, licensed via Canva.

Chapter 5. Historic Objects

Zār spirit images reflect historic realities. A 1944 military parade in Downtown, Cairo. Original photograph in the collection of S. van Roode.

Chapter 6. The world of *zār* jewellery

The Egyptian Nile Valley landscape, enclosed by mountain ranges on either side, is also reflected in the spirit images. Water spirits form a significant category, and many of the pendants with human shapes show the mountainous landscape on either side. Photo Getty Images, licensed via Canva.

Chapter 7. Conclusions

An old pigeon tower in Egypt. These structures could be of considerable height and dotted the rural landscape of the Nile Valley and the oases. Photo Getty Images, licensed via Canva.

APPENDIX 1

THE COSTS OF A ZĀR: A CASE STUDY FROM 1913

Not only does *zār* show similarities to a wedding, it is often claimed that having a personal *zār* can also be as expensive as a wedding.⁵⁹⁵ Of all types of dealing with spirit possession, *zār* is the only one Blackman explicitly speaks out against because of the costs.⁵⁹⁶ Clothes, jewellery, food, incense and payment of the *zār* staff amount to a considerable sum.⁵⁹⁷ Already in the earliest report from 1877, *zār* is described as expensive: instead of the elaborate jewellery sets of later date, only a thick silver ring is mentioned with ‘occasionally anklets and bracelets’, yet according to the author ‘many would give their last penny to afford this jewellery’.⁵⁹⁸ In fact, the costs could rise so high that in 1903 Muhammad Hilmi Zayn ed-Din included a poignant motto in his pamphlet ‘The Harmfulness of the *Zār*’,⁵⁹⁹ which in the translation of Zwemer reads as:

Three things good luck from the threshold bar
A wedding, a funeral and the *zār*.⁶⁰⁰

The motto itself however does not speak of merely ‘barring good luck’, but rather of ‘ruining’, referring to the cost of all three ceremonies.⁶⁰¹ In order to gain more insight into the relative cost of *zār*, I have attempted a comparison between the necessary items for one *zār* as listed in a report from 1913⁶⁰², the silver prices of the

595 See for example Adly 1984 p. 663 or Fakhouri 1968, p. 53. Le Brun differentiates in 1902, p. 263 between *zars* for which one spends as much as for a wedding, and cheaper ones that do not cost as much.

596 Blackman 1927, p. 200.

597 In 1929 it was noted that only the rich could afford a *zār* in Muscat, Oman, by Miss Luton of the American Mission. See Gordon 1929, p. 154.

598 Klunzinger 1877, as quoted by Littman 1950, p. 41.

599 The publication is titled *Madar al-Zār*. Kahle 1912, p. 3 and Mitchell 1991, p. 100.

600 Zwemers translation in Zwemer 1920 p. 228.

601 As translated by Kahle 1912, p. 3. For the investment in a wedding, see Kholoussy 2010. For the investment in a funeral, see the elaborate description given by Wickett 2010.

602 I chose this report, because it is one of the most detailed listing the various goods needed. Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich also include a list of necessities for their event in 1957, but as their *zār* might to a certain degree be orchestrated, these might not be representative for an average *zār*.

period and the income of an average Egyptian household in the lower classes. The results, presented in the following paragraphs, indicate that having a private *zār* would indeed have been a very costly affair and that ‘ruining’ is certainly not too strong a word.

Items needed for *zār*

The description from 1913 lists the arrangement for a *zār* involving a Sudanese spirit⁶⁰³: different kinds of nuts, parched peas, sesame seed, parsley, coffee in a paper package, two heads of sugar, two bowls of sour milk, two pieces of soap, a plate of oranges, one of feast cakes, another of Turkish delight, candy and sugared nuts, cucumbers and apples, all of which were covered with a piece of red cloth, three small candles and two large ones on the floor. In addition, incense was burnt and two white hens and a cock were used as sacrificial animals. Salt and flour were sprinkled around during the dancing and a bottle of rosewater was present to quench thirst. In terms of staff the ritual specialist was present with a team of women that played two *darbuka* drums, two smaller drums and a barrel drum, adding up to five musicians. The patient and other women were wearing ‘blue and white Sudan charms, silver chains, anklets, bracelets etc.’⁶⁰⁴

Cost of items needed for *zār*

Historic silver prices are available only since 1915⁶⁰⁵, but in January of that year the silver price was \$12.45 per ounce. With an average weight of 10 grams, one *zār* pendant would have cost around \$4.5,⁶⁰⁶ the equivalent of which in Egyptian pounds was circa LE 1.⁶⁰⁷ In addition to at least one pendant, the patient would need other jewellery: in the case from 1913, necklaces, anklets and bracelets are mentioned with a rather ominous ‘etcetera’. Assuming from the description this patient would need one necklace, two anklets, two bracelets, a *zār* pendant and some smaller items like a ring or another charm, the amount of silver jewellery alone would around 530 grams⁶⁰⁸, costing a little under LE 50. This alone constituted nearly a year’s income, as I will illustrate in the next section.

In addition to the silver, the elements for the *kursī* had to be provided for as well. A new white *gallābīya* would cost around LE 2. In a time when a family would have only one spare set of clothes for celebrations, buying a new *gallābīya* would have been a significant purchase.⁶⁰⁹

603 Thompson 1913, p. 278, also cited in Zwemer 1920, p. 230.

604 Zwemer 1920, p. 234 also adds that the patient is dressed in white and ornamented with special charms.

605 To establish silver prices during the period of interest for this study, <http://www.macrotrends.net/1470/historical-silver-prices-100-year-chart> has been used. Up until 1914, the pound reflected the Gold Standard. Egypt adopted an official hallmarking system only in 1916.

606 An ounce is 28.3 grams.

607 From 1914 until 1962, the Egyptian pound (LE) was pegged to the British pound at a rate of LE 0.975 for 1 pound sterling, as Egypt was all but formally a British protectorate. Kholoussy 2010, p. xi. The exchange rate LE to dollar was around LE 0.25 to \$ 1. Young 2017, p. 52, note 17.

608 As weighed from examples from 1913 in my own collection.

609 Chalcraft 2005, p. 129.

Sugar, produced in abundance in Egypt, was cheap⁶¹⁰, coffee was a luxury product.⁶¹¹ Local *baladī* soap, made of cottonseed oil, was on the cheaper end, imported soap from Nablus would have been costlier. Candles were also made from cottonseed oil. Incense was again an expensive product.⁶¹² Local produce such as parsley, sesame seed, dried nuts and peas, cucumbers, apples, oranges and milk would not have been too expensive. The three sacrificial animals, two white hens and a cock, would have cost more. Add to that the wages of the ritual specialist and her assistants, and I imagine the total cost for this *zār* could be estimated to be in the ranges of LE 60-80.

Average income in 1913

In 1913 local labour was very cheap and wages were low.⁶¹³ For a breadwinner in the lower classes, wages of 14 piastres a day would be the minimum required to clothe and feed a family. Female garment makers, working from home, earned around 1-2 piastres a day, male tailors could just about reach the minimum subsistence level of LE2 per month. Shoemakers on the high end reached an income of 15 to 19 piastres per day, weavers were left with around 5 piastres a day, carpenters and masons hauled in 8 to 10 piastres a day. Higher wages were earned by mechanics, electricians, brick workers and other specialist jobs in the construction industry: these would vary between 15 and 40 piastres a day. The remaining population mainly worked in agriculture, a field where inequality was high and about 70% of the peasant population barely got by.⁶¹⁴

This would leave a family in the lower classes with an average monthly income of LE 1,5 to LE 5, rising to LE 10 in the better rewarded jobs. In 1913, a reader of newspaper al-Ahram sent a letter to the editor, mentioning that young men in Egypt earned only a maximum of LE 5 per month.⁶¹⁵ An average annual household income in 1913 can be estimated to have been around LE 60.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹⁰ See Herschlag 1964, p. 127 for the economic developments on the sugar market in Egypt.

⁶¹¹ A cup of coffee in a coffeehouse cost around 0,5 piastre, as inferred from the Baedeker travel guides from 1902 and 1929. This *zār* was held however when Egypt was still part of the Ottoman Empire, recovering from a major crisis in 1907, on the brink of World War I and before the Americas started exporting coffee on the large scale we are accustomed to nowadays. Chalcraft 2005, p. 129 describes how coffee was a luxury product in 1907.

⁶¹² Khoury 1980, p. 363 specifies incense from the incense tree, *oudh*, benzoin, myrrh and camphor: all expensive, imported products.

⁶¹³ The following wages have been gathered from Chalcraft 2005, p. 107 ff.

⁶¹⁴ Cuno 2010, p. 98.

⁶¹⁵ Kholoussy 2010, p. 25. The letter was sent to express concern about traditional dowry demands, which could not be met by prospective grooms due to their low income.

⁶¹⁶ Yousef 2002, table A1, lists the real GDP per capita in 1913 at 9.04 LE.

APPENDIX 2

GLOSSARY OF ARABIC TERMS

‘arūsa

Bride. In the context of *zār*: the patient.

baraka

Blessing, good luck.

ḥadra

Visiting day for the shrines of saints and other important figures. In the context of *zār*: regular public *zār*, usually held weekly.

fiḍḍa

Silver

ḥijāb

Veil, barrier. In magical context: an amulet.

jalājil

Small globular dangles

kabsa

Infertility caused by the presence of certain polluting materials or people that have been in contact with these during the period that a woman is considered ritually vulnerable on account of blood after the main crisis-events of circumcision, defloration, childbirth or miscarriage. Also known as *mushāhara*.

kursī

Seat, throne. In the context of *zār*: an altar.

maulid

Festival in honour of the birthday of the Prophet or of saints.

mushāhara

Infertility caused by the presence of certain polluting materials or people that have been in contact with these during the period that a woman is considered ritually vulnerable on account of blood after the main crisis-events of circumcision, defloration, childbirth or miscarriage. Also known as *kabsa*.

qarin

Jinn born together with every human, considered a companion that may either protect or harm its human counterpart.

qarina

Female jinn causing miscarriages or stillbirths, known to harm or kill babies and young children, too.

ṣaika

Shaykha, in the context of *zār*: the ritual specialist.

ṣulḥ

Reconciliation; method of settling disputes.

uḳt

Sister. In the context of spirit engagement: female companion spirit. See also *qarin*.