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Silver of the possessed: jewellery in the Egyptian zār
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INTRODUCTION

1.1 AIMS AND APPROACH

What is ‘zār jewellery’? That question is at the heart of this study. At first glance, it seems to be a matter of straightforward terminology and definition, but that belies the multifaceted character of these objects and the contexts in which they existed over the course of a century.

These contexts started around the second half of the 19th century when an African possession cult called *zār* spread through Egypt, gaining immense popularity among women of the Egyptian Nile Valley. Jewellery formed part of *zār*, as German doctor Klunzinger noted already in 1878.¹ Silver jewellery with images of spirits started to appear in the early 20th century and played a role in *zār* for over seven decades, until they ceased to be made in the 1980s. These jewellery items show hand-engraved, frontal views of male and female spirits as well as mermaids, surrounded by a zigzag border. From the late 1950s onwards, the hand-engraved pieces were gradually replaced by machine-tooled, much thinner and lighter pieces. Currently, jewellery items with spirit representations are in collections of private collectors and museums, along with a wide variety of other items called ‘zār jewellery’. Despite jewellery in *zār* having a history of over a century and pieces with spirit images having been collected in large numbers, it is surprisingly vague what makes jewellery into ‘zār jewellery’, and what role it played in *zār*.

1.1.1 Collected context

My starting point to unravel the question of what *zār* jewellery is, is its current context: as collected items. As such, I have used an artefactual approach,² in which material culture is central to my observations and conclusions, rather than relying on the first-hand experience of attending one or more *zār* rituals. I chose this approach because, although *zār* itself is still practised in Egypt, its use of jewellery has changed considerably. To begin with, the jewellery under study in this volume is older than *zār* as it is carried out in the present: it was manufactured and used between 1900 and 1980 approximately, so in a timeframe spanning around half a

1 Klunzinger 1878, p. 388.

2 Houlbrook and Armitage 2015.

century to a century ago. The period under study in this thesis is a little wider: from the first mention of *zār* in Egypt in 1869 until today, encompassing a little over 150 years.

The collection history of *zār* jewellery coincides with its publication history. In other words, our view on *zār* jewellery, and notably that of jewellery with spirit images, has largely been shaped by both publications about jewellery that had already been collected and, prior to that, by the choices made in the act of collecting itself. As Ter Keurs points out, it is in the act of collecting that the first instances of meaning getting ‘lost in translation’ occur: there is a difference in understanding of these jewellery items between local networks producing and using them, and the world of foreign collectors that noticed and then started to collect them.³ One of the first aims of this study is to unravel how collections of *zār* jewellery have come into being, and what the current interpretations of these items are based on.

The fact that this particular material culture of *zār* takes the form of jewellery in my view is relevant. And so, in this study, two contexts intersect: that of ritual and that of jewellery. I will go into both next.

1.1.2 Living context: ritual

The primary context in which I have studied *zār* jewellery as living objects is that of ritual. *Zār* is a possession cult with its own rituals and community, which I will introduce in more detail in chapter 2. For understanding the context and the inner workings of *zār* itself, the works by Boddy⁴ and Hadidi⁵ have been instrumental. However, this present study focuses on objects used in *zār* – objects that are material remnants of acts and transactions with, or by, invisible beings.⁶ Like archaeological finds, that makes them very suitable for tracing changes in ritual itself: seemingly small changes in the material record can indicate the onset of a substantial change in acts in, or even interpretation of, ritual.

A closely related aspect is that of ‘agency’. The concept of agency is diffuse and generally pertains to the meaning or power objects can have, or be given, in a certain context. The most relevant aspect of agency in relation to *zār* jewellery is that as put forward by Gell⁷: the emotional impact objects have on humans. Jewellery with spirit images has had a profound emotional impact, not only on its original wearers, but also on its later collectors. Exploring what that agency was and is, is another aim of this study, as is explaining the difference in perception.

Zār itself is not an isolated phenomenon: it exists in the context of spirit engagement in Egypt in general. The large number of ‘regular’ amulets in the jewellery I studied for this volume testifies to this larger landscape of spirit engagement. Spirits play a role in many informal practices⁸, and these practices themselves change over time⁹. Hansen argues that these are part of dialectic processes, in which oral traditions and acts are

3 Ter Keurs 2014, p. 50-51.

4 Boddy 1989.

5 Hadidi 2006 and 2016.

6 Keane 2008, p. 110.

7 Gell 1998.

8 Drieskens 2008 for an overview of spirit engagement in Cairo.

9 Hansen 2006 for an overview of spirit engagement in Cairo from ancient Egypt until the present.

transmitted from one generation to another.¹⁰ With every generation, these traditions and acts change as they adapt to new circumstances, but they retain elements as well. Given the period under study in this book, approximately 150 years, placing these changing and surviving elements of spirit engagement for both *zār* and other forms of spirit engagement in their temporal context is essential. To provide ‘temporal anchors’ I have used Lane 1842, Blackman 1927 and Drieskens 2008. Lane wrote his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* before *zār* arrived in the Nile Valley, and Drieskens researched spirit engagement in Egypt in a period when *zār* was still practised, but after the last hallmark date of the jewellery pieces with spirit representations.

Lane, being a man, would not have been allowed into the female domain, so we need to bear in mind his notes on the beliefs and acts of women are based what male informants told him about such matters. This brings me to the perspective of gender. Interaction with spirits itself is not necessarily a gendered domain¹¹, but the use of jewellery *is*. While we may see more material evidence from the domain of women, that does not imply the absence of interaction between spirits and men, or a stronger belief in such interactions among women. For both men and women, the interaction with spirits focuses on navigating the important transitions in life as well as on the desire to have children: spirits may prevent this from happening in many ways.¹² Women make use of jewellery in a variety of ways to ward off evil spirits. As objects worn on the body, they provide a barrier between the self and outside influences. Many jewellery items have amuletic capacities one way or another, be it in the choice of materials, colours, form and decoration, or their placement on the body, their smells or sounds. But there is more to jewellery in a woman’s life.

1.1.3 Living context: jewellery

Just as *zār* is not an isolated ritual but firmly embedded in the wider context of spirit engagement in Egypt, jewellery is not an isolated category of material culture either. Apart from its amuletic capacities, jewellery plays an important economic role in a woman’s life. This is because of its amount of silver or gold: it is her main asset and the basis for her financial independence.

The processes of singularization and commoditization, as outlined by Kopytoff, are applicable to this intersection of jewellery and ritual.¹³ Singular objects are objects precluded from exchanging or selling; such an object is literally a non-commodity. Among these often are ritual objects and rare items that convey status or power. Not all non-commodities carry ritual or other powers, however; some non-commodities are too worthless to carry any significance or even value. Opposed to singular objects are objects that are meant to be sold or exchanged: they are common, general things. A hybrid form are singular objects that still need to be purchased, but are forbidden

¹⁰ Hansen 2006, pp. 111-112.

¹¹ Lane 1842 recounts male attitudes towards spirits, Blackman 1927 presents both male and female beliefs and acts with regard to spirits; Drieskens 2008, pp. 16-17 discusses how a gender-based approach does not reflect Cairene reality.

¹² Hansen 2006 focuses on this.

¹³ Kopytoff 1986, p. 74-75.

to be resold or gifted away, for example, personally tailored medicine. These are called ‘terminal commodities’¹⁴: one could also say such an object is a single-way commodity.

Jewellery, in general, is first and foremost a commodity. Gifts of jewellery are common during every transition in life, such as engagement, marriage and childbirth, as well as on religious celebrations.¹⁵ These gifts hold strong financial significance, and women increase their jewellery collection throughout their life as a means of securing capital. Inflation renders actual currency worthless, while precious metals can be exchanged against the current rate when the need arises.¹⁶ Jewellery is sold to cover major expenses, such as the wedding of sons or hospitalisation. This economic aspect extends into the *zār* community. *Zār* jewellery, like regular jewellery, is primarily made of silver. Silver has no particular capacities that would make it the material of choice for ritual purposes: it was the expenses that mattered most, as I will address in chapter 4; instead of silver, more affluent people would use gold jewellery in *zār*. Apart from ritual, *zār* is a business, as Hadidi 2006 explained.¹⁷ The ritual specialist and her staff are paid for their services, as were the silversmiths creating these items, but the network stretches further to suppliers of incense, candles, and foodstuffs used in *zār*.¹⁸

The economic aspect of jewellery is fundamental for our understanding today. Appadurai links the commodity aspect of an object to its social life: there are moments in the object’s life where its main social function is to be exchanged in return for something else, and those are the moments in which an object moves from one situation to the next.¹⁹ This notion of movement underlays the chain of events from the initial production of a piece of jewellery to its current presence in a collection, often in another country. It ended up there as a result of the choices made by the women who used these items: the economic aspect of jewellery influenced household politics, formed a part in their decision to eventually sell these items, and as such is tied in to the collection history of these pieces.

1.1.4 Historic context

It is this larger community created by *zār* that continues to speak through the jewellery with spirit images. For this, we need to turn to the origins of *zār*. Just as *zār* forms part of a larger context of spirit engagement in Egypt and the jewellery used has other aspects than just adornment, *zār* itself as a phenomenon did not appear out of thin air. *Zār* is not particular to Egypt, but in the words of Hadidi is a ‘transnational hybrid phenomenon.’²⁰ More specifically, *zār* as practised in Egypt is an African possession cult with roots in Ethiopia and Nigeria.²¹

14 Kopytoff 1986, p. 75.

15 Bakker & McKeown 201, p. 200.

16 As already mentioned by Blackman 1927, p. 47.

17 Hadidi 2006, p. 80; p. 102 where the ritual specialist is considered a business partner of the silversmiths; p. 108 where the money made in the *zār* community circulates back into this community. See also ‘Abd er-Rasoul 1955, p. 2, who mentions that the ritual specialist is connected to the goldsmiths and the herbalists.

18 ‘Abd er-Rasoul 1955, p. 81; Hadidi 2006, pp. 80-81.

19 Appadurai 1988, p. 13-14.

20 Hadidi 2006, p. 47, note 12.

21 See chapter 2 and 5 for further discussion.

An element of many African possession cults is the capacity to store and transmit collective memory,²² and *zār* possesses that same capacity. The works of Behrend & Luig²³, Kramer²⁴ and Lewis²⁵ have shaped my understanding of African possession cults as carriers of memory, and the study by Megerssa & Kassam²⁶ has shed light on the knowledge structures present within those possession cults. The mnemonic capacity of *zār* has been noted for Egyptian *zār* as well,²⁷ but where this is often explored in *zār* songs or the identity of *zār* spirits²⁸, its presence in jewellery has gone unnoticed. In the larger family of African possession cults, *zār* in Egypt is the only member that uses material culture with spirit images in the form of jewellery. I argue that these images form a historic source in two ways. They reflect actual historic events in approximately 3% of the pieces with spirit images, but mostly, they visualise the world of the *zār* community. For this last capacity, the concept of the ‘personal front’ as formulated by Goffman²⁹ has been most helpful to catch a glimpse of that world.

1.1.5 Limitations of this study

This study focuses on Egyptian *zār* jewellery. It does not aim to be a study into the theory of agency, ritual and materiality, nor into the many layered and thoroughly adaptive nature of *zār* itself. Rather, it concentrates on one object category of the Egyptian *zār*: jewellery at the intersection of collecting, ritual and economics in a diachronic perspective.

As we shall see, there is no such thing as ‘the’ *zār* in the wide geographical area in which *zār* is practised. *Zār* as practised in Sudan differs from that of Egypt, which differs from the Arabian Peninsula, and so on. In this study, I have focused on Egyptian *zār*.

As I have worked with collected jewellery in a secondary context, the study is undertaken from a supra-regional perspective. This means that I have studied the collected jewellery from Egypt on a national level without making subdivisions into regional styles, the existence of which Hadidi refers to but which I have not been able to observe myself.³⁰ That same limitation applies to the religious background of the participants; I have not been able to discern explicitly between *zār* jewellery used by Christian or Muslim participants. As Islam is the main religion in Egypt, my main focus is on *zār* in an Islamic context. I have attempted to present the general context of *zār* jewellery, which may possibly serve as starting point for conducting more detailed regional analyses in the future.

22 See Behrend & Luig 1999, p. xviii-xx ‘Spirit possession as performative ethnography and history ‘from below’ for an introduction. Also Motta 2005, p. 298 for an example of an Indian spirit in Brazil, referring to a rebellion leader, and Della Subin 2021 for both *zār* and an introduction into similar phenomena worldwide.

23 Behrend & Luig 1999.

24 Kramer 1987.

25 Lewis et. al. 1991.

26 Megerssa & Kassam 2019.

27 Sengers 2003, p. 105-106; Hadidi 2016, pp. 127-144.

28 As for example elaborated upon by Kenyon 2012, and also noted by Hadidi 2006, Sengers 2003.

29 Goffman 1959.

30 Hadidi 2016, p. 22 indicates a difference in Upper Egyptian and Cairene *zār* amulets. Weeks 1984 also mentions local differences in *zār*.

Within the focus on Egyptian *zār* jewellery, there is a further emphasis on the jewellery with spirit images. This is the only type of jewellery that can with certainty be ascribed to *zār*.

There are also limitations in the sources used. I have not used Arabic sources because of my own inadequacy in this language. That means that all written source material is derived from Western publications and thus, unavoidably, one-sided.³¹ I have maintained transliterations of Arabic as I have found them in the literature quoted: a glossary at the end of this study presents a standardized rendering of the most important Arabic words used, following the dictionary by Hans Wehr.

Finally, this artefactual approach revolves around a specific category of the material culture of *zār*: the jewellery used. Obviously, this is not the only material culture present in *zār*: each spirit has its own material demands such as particular perfumes, certain foods and drinks, or specific objects. In addition, musical instruments are used, as are dishes, bowls, and other utilitarian objects. These will also not be discussed in this study, although they will be referred to where needed.

1.1.6 Terminology

I would like to address a few words most often found in publications about *zār*: ‘amulet’, ‘jewellery’, and ‘cult’, and explain how I interpret and use these throughout this study.

The vast majority of publications refer to jewellery with spirit representations as ‘*zār* amulets’. They are called *hijāb* in Egyptian Arabic, often translated as ‘amulet’ as well.³² As Garcia Probert has shown in the context of the Tawfiq Canaan-collection of amulets, *hijāb* is a generic term covering a variety of amulets, each with their own agency.³³ However, using vocabulary like ‘amulets’ may influence our understanding of that agency. There are many definitions of what an amulet is expected to do, none of which necessarily align with the functions of *zār* jewellery. I have avoided the use of ‘amulets’ for jewellery items with spirit images and instead indicate them based on their appearance: pendants with spirit images, bracelets with spirit images, rings with spirit images. Where other authors use the word ‘amulet’ I have continued that use in quotations or references to their work. In this book, I consider an amulet to be an object believed to contribute to future events that have not yet come to pass. Those can be either bad or good: an amulet may help keep evil, sickness and other negativity at a distance, and it may be directed at obtaining blessings, good health, and other positive things.

The word ‘jewellery’ itself may also be limiting for our grasp of these objects. Unger, in her multidisciplinary framework for the study of jewellery, presents as definition of jewellery ‘a piece of jewellery is an object that is worn on the human body, as a decorative and symbolic addition to its outward appearance’.³⁴ However, as I will demonstrate in this study, pieces with spirit images, for the most part of their life,

31 The work of scholars from the Arab world has of course been used insofar as these publications were accessible and available in English, French, or German, but still many more in Arabic remain. See for an overview for example Natvig 1988.

32 Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1962 refer to them as *higab qalb*, ‘heart amulet’. Weeks 1984 uses the word *hafessa*.

33 Garcia Probert 2021, p. 55.

34 Unger 2019, p. 18.

were not part of an ‘outward’ appearance, and their significance goes beyond that of an ‘addition’ – are they, then, ‘jewellery’? Interestingly, a difference between ‘jewellery’ and ‘amulet’ is noted in 1955 by Abd er-Rasoul, who writes about the pieces with spirit images: ‘They are also symbolically called ‘Sigha’ (jewelry) because they are made of silver or gold, although they are amulets’.³⁵ Another role not included in Unger’s definition, but one that jewellery in Egypt certainly has as I introduced above, is that of a portable asset. The sample collection consists of items we would indeed recognise as jewellery, such as bracelets, rings, anklets, made of metal (including silver) or beads and visually indistinguishable from regular, i.e. non-*zār*, jewellery. For lack of a better word, I use ‘jewellery’ throughout this study for all objects designed to be worn on the human body as an addition to dress. These objects, in turn, have their own roles: they may be amulets, but also practical dress accessories such as belts, they are wearable assets, and, of course, they can be embellishments in the aesthetic sense of the word.³⁶

And finally, I have chosen to refer to *zār* as ‘cult’, following Natvig 1987. He defines ‘cult’ in the sense of a ‘small, often local, more loosely organised and more individualistic group’³⁷ and states that ‘cults are often little concerned with doctrine, and belonging to a cult is independent of allegiance to a particular set of doctrines, and does not preclude membership in other kinds of religious groups’.³⁸ It is precisely this flexibility of *zār* that I wish to emphasise by using the word ‘cult’.

1.2 SOURCES: SAMPLE COLLECTION

For this volume I have studied a substantial collection of jewellery items identified as *zār* by their curators and collectors. In this section I will introduce the sample collection and discuss its main challenges. Throughout this book, pieces from the sample collection are referred to as ‘sample coll.’.

1.2.1 Challenges in the sample collection: definition and bias

First, how certain can we be that the jewellery in the sample collection is indeed ‘*zār* jewellery’? After all, what is, and what is not, *zār* jewellery is one of the primary questions this study seeks to answer. The only jewellery items that can unequivocally be ascribed to *zār* are those with spirit images. In the collections that I have studied for this thesis, many other pieces of jewellery were present as well, identified by their collectors as *zār*.³⁹ I have chosen to include everything without imposing my own ideas of what *zār* jewellery should be.

A complicating factor is that the collection- and publication history, addressed in chapter 3, reveals that most jewellery present in collections today, believed to be *zār*, has been acquired after the two major publications on *zār* jewellery⁴⁰ had seen

35 ‘Abd er-Rasoul 1955, p. 7.

36 A personal observation is that the words used for jewellery items may reflect these different roles. I have heard *siga* or *masāg* for jewellery in general: when called simply *dahab* ‘gold’ or *fidda* ‘silver’ this appears to me to be used more in the context of its value, and when an amulet is meant it is called *higāb*.

37 Natvig 1987, p. 670.

38 Natvig 1987, p. 670.

39 I have asked collectors, so people who already obtained jewellery they believe to be *zār*. They may base their opinion on information sellers provided them with, or in later research of their own.

40 Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1962 and Bachinger & Schienerl 1984.

Collection	Studied as
Schienerl (Landesmuseum Oldenburg)	In person
Schienerl (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden)	In person
Schienerl (Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna)	In person
Blackman (Pitt-Rivers, Oxford)	Photographs
Nationaal Museum Wereldculturen (The Netherlands)	In person
Indiana University Museum (USA)	Photographs
Medelhavsmuseet (Sweden)	In person
Reem Maguid Amin (Egypt)	In person
Beads of Paradise (USA)	Photographs
Giovanni Bonotto (Italy)	In person
Jolanda Bos/Wearable Heritage (The Netherlands)	In person
Rene Cappers (The Netherlands)	In person
Derek Content (UK)	In person
Sarah Corbett (UK)	Photographs
Qilada Foundation – Eric and Marion Crince Le Roy (The Netherlands)	In person
Patricia Deany (USA)	Photographs
Cornelia Demaree (The Netherlands)	In person
Yasmine el Dorghamy (Egypt)	Photographs
Aleksandr Emelyanov	Photographs
Janny Haverhals (The Netherlands)	In person
Marlise Hof (The Netherlands)	Photographs
Karel Innemée (The Netherlands)	In person
Remke Kruk (The Netherlands)	In person
Inge Lagerweij (The Netherlands)	In person
Sylvie Lebars (France)	Photographs
Arna Mendonca Ferreira (Kazakhstan)	Photographs
Jocelyne O'Krent (USA)	Photographs
Sigrid van Roode (The Netherlands)	In person
Savanna Storm Russo (Australia)	Photographs
Nefertari Tadema (The Netherlands)	In person
Tesori Orientali (USA)	Photographs
Vonda Adorno (USA)	Photographs/in person
Sylvia Walters Jenette (USA)	Photographs
Carry Zaghow Offers (Egypt)	Photographs
Anonymous	Photographs

Table 1.1. Composition of the sample collection: collections under study and whether I have studied them in person or through photographs.

the light of day in the 1960s – these collections are therefore inevitably biased, as they have been based on published notions of what *zār* jewellery should look like.⁴¹ This leaves the possibility that jewellery with spirit representations may be present in collections acquired before these publications were released, but not labelled as *zār* because they were not recognised as such. I have reached out to museums with older collections of Egyptian ethnography and requested to see everything they have on Egyptian jewellery, in search of pieces with spirit representations. I have found only three pieces with spirit representations collected before 1960 and not identified as *zār* in museum collections.⁴² Table 1.1 shows the collections used for this study.

1.2.2 Composition of the sample collection

The sample collection consists of 1,239 pieces of jewellery identified as *zār* jewellery by their respective owners, within larger collections. Of these, 681 feature spirit images, while 558 do not. These collections include both museum and private holdings. The collection of dr. Peter W. Schienerl and his wife Jutta Schienerl, now housed in the Ethnological Museum in Dresden, the Weltmuseum in Vienna and the Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch in Oldenburg, has been of considerable importance. The Schienerls amassed thousands of objects of popular culture in Egypt during the second half of the 20th century.⁴³ I had the opportunity to study this collection in person in all three museums. The extensive collection of Dee Birnbaum, currently in the Indiana Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, was generously offered for study in the form of high-resolution photographs.⁴⁴ In addition to the museum collections, many private collectors provided access to their collections. Most of these I studied in person, while collections outside of Europe have been made available to me through photographs. Table 1.1 indicates which collections I examined in person, and for which I had to resort to photographs.

1.2.3 Challenges in the sample collection: dating

As this study aims to be diachronic, dating jewellery items with images of spirits has been of great importance. The dates of these items are based on the hallmarks they carry. Towards the end of the 19th century, silver occasionally bore an Ottoman stamp. The first true hallmarks were introduced in Egypt in 1914.⁴⁵ From 1916 onward, a hallmarking system was implemented, marking silver objects with the grade of silver content, the location of the assay office, the official mark for silver, and the year of marking.⁴⁶ Although hallmarking may also occur upon selling a previously unmarked piece, this has been attested only a few times in the sample collection.⁴⁷ In compliance with the law, most pieces have been hallmarked around the time of

41 Theoretically, this also opens the door to new productions of old jewellery to satisfy the demand of collectors. I have not come across such productions, and given the carefully guarded hallmark system in Egypt, I have no reason to suspect otherwise.

42 These will be discussed in chapter 3.

43 See Gerber 2008 for a history of these collections.

44 Many thanks go to dr. Emily Bryant for her help in making these available for this study.

45 Nicklewicz 2016, p. 90. This system was based on the British hallmarking system.

46 Nicklewicz 2016, p. 90.

47 These instances are presented and discussed in chapter 5.

their production and sale. The year of marking provides the most precise date, though the applicable range of the hallmarks varies over time. From 1916 onward, hallmarks changed each year, generally halfway through the year, placing the item within the range of two calendar years. After 1949, Egyptian hallmarks were sometimes in use for longer periods, dating the object within the range of several calendar years, generally within 3 to even 7 years. The official mark for silver provides a broader date: before or after 1946. Up until 1946, the official mark for silver took the shape of a cat, and from 1946 onwards a lotus flower has been used. For the purpose of this study, I have referred to the hallmarks chart as included in Niklewicz 2016.⁴⁸ One particular mark was not included in Niklewicz 2016, but occurred repeatedly: twelve times on jewellery with spirit representations, fifteen times on other jewellery pieces, and in both cases only in association with a cat stamp, marking it before 1946. I have discussed this particular mark with Danusia Niklewicz of the Hallmark Research Institute, who also was unable to explain this hallmark definitively despite her extensive research into hallmarks.⁴⁹

Of all jewellery items carrying representations of spirits in the sample collection, 120 lack a hallmark. I have dated these on stylistic grounds, based on comparison with dated specimens.⁵⁰

1.2.4 Challenges in the sample collection: size

For this study, I have been dependent on the cooperation of museums and collectors, as I have worked with the jewellery made available to me. That raises the question of the relevance of this dataset from a statistical point of view. The primary data of relevance consists of items with spirit images, which are the only items that can be attributed to *zār* with certainty. To study this dataset over time, items with spirit images also will need to be dated or datable, as discussed above. This narrows the main dataset to dated items with spirit representations. Within this main dataset, a smaller dataset exists that I used to trace reflections of socio-political events and developments in Egypt. When the dataset of dated items with spirit representations had reached 300 pieces, only 3 % were found to be related to specific events. At that point, I have calculated the necessary sample size by zooming in on the desired frequency of jewellery items with spirit representations related to actual events: if the proportion of this particular jewellery is indeed around 3%, how many individuals would the dataset need to confirm this proportion?⁵¹ To calculate the sample size for a confidence interval around a proportion, I have used the following formula:

$$n = \frac{4Z_{crit}^2 p (1 - p)}{D^2}$$

48 This is the most recent overview of Egyptian hallmarks, developed in close cooperation with the Cairo Assay Office. Earlier overviews of Egyptian hallmarks such as in Fahmy 2007, also found on hallmarkwiki.com, are less complete.

49 Email correspondence between May 14, 2018 and May 26th, 2019.

50 See chapter 5.

51 Eng 2003. Although this publication is written to calculate sample sizes for radiology study purposes, the underlying principles are the same.

The results of this formula are to be regarded as the estimate of an absolute minimum.⁵² The width of the estimated proportion is set at 3%, as has the confidence interval (p). Confidence (z) and statistical significance have been set at 1,96 and 0,05 respectively. This approach resulted in n = 497 dated jewellery items with spirit representations.⁵³ With a sample of this size, the chance of missing an object with spirit representation related to actual events is 0,025. The number of dated pieces with spirit representations is 561, meeting the absolute minimum criterion.

1.3 SOURCES: LITERATURE

Besides the sample collection, I have based this thesis on written sources. A challenge in this regard is that the best-known publications dealing with jewellery in *zār* have been written with collected jewellery as their starting point, and there are only a few publications that describe jewellery within the ritual itself. I will introduce these publications below. Before I do, I address several parameters against which I have read these publications: discernible bias, gender, authenticity of the events described and descriptive detail.

1.3.1 Parameters

Many of the earlier studies into *zār* display a clear religious or cultural bias. They consist of notes and articles in mission publications and chapters in early anthropological observations on local culture. As the interest in psychological studies increased in the 19th and 20th centuries, *zār* also was noticed as potential research topic. However, it took some time for *zār* to be seen and studied in its own right: early studies mainly relate the trance-stage of *zār* to the, at that time, popular and much researched subject of hysteria in women. In addition, *zār* posed a challenge for Muslim scholars: including it as a topic in the field of mental health implied accrediting the ritual with some form of merit, which was not very desirable from a formal religious viewpoint.⁵⁴ So, even though early literature has the advantage of being contemporary with the jewellery under study, the scientific, cultural and social predilections of the period in which it was written need to be taken into account.

To complicate matters further, the majority of anthropological studies published in the first half of the 20th century were written by men. As *zār* was, as it still is, mainly a women's affair, male observers would not have been granted access as easily.⁵⁵ The number of eye witness accounts, therefore, is rather limited. In one tantalizing case, an eye witness account by a female attendee was available but deliberately left out of the publication.⁵⁶ Following the developments in the western world concerning female

52 Eng 2003, p. 312.

53 Using the sample size calculator developed in addition to Eng 2003 <http://www.rad.jhmi.edu/jeng/javarad/samplesize/>, accessed on August 26th, 2019.

54 See Khouri 2005, p. 119.

55 Macdonald 1911, p. 332-333 for example writes that 'Men are never supposed to see it, and only by the rare chance and possibility of an intelligent woman taking part in it could the knowledge of it come to us in the West'. Kahle 1912 relates on p.5 how a *zār shaykha* did not follow up on his question to explain the *zār* songs to him out of fear, although of what exactly is not mentioned. McPherson vividly describes the consternation caused by his presence outside the room where a *zār* was held in the 1920's in Carman & McPherson 1983, p. 239 ff.

56 Littmann 1950: see below in section 1.4.1.

scholarly independence in the second half of the 20th century, the number of studies by women increased. Access to *zār*, its participants and its officiating women became less difficult and the phenomenon received more, and more thorough, research.

The reports of *zār* events also differ in the method of their execution. Some descriptions are by eyewitnesses, while others have been translated from manuscripts by others. Not all *zār* events described are actual, original *zār* ceremonies: some have been staged for the occasion. Lastly, some reports have been published years to decades after the event they describe, which may affect the accuracy of details presented.

A final challenging factor in compiling the present volume is the apparent lack of descriptive detail in existing literature when it comes to jewellery used in the Egyptian *zār*. Although thousands of jewellery items with spirit images survive to the present day, remarkably little is stated about these in publications on *zār*.⁵⁷ It appears to me the focus of the studies often lies with elements that are notably different from the cultural background of the observer: much is written about the trance, the sacrificing of animals and the use of blood, the rhythms drummed and the spirits invoked. If at all mentioned, jewellery is treated in passing, almost as a given factor, nothing exquisitely exotic or to get too excited about. None of the publications studied for this volume provide clear statements about how, where and when this jewellery was acquired, how it was used during and after an Egyptian *zār* and what its role in the broader scenery of the *zār* world is.

1.3.2 Written sources combining jewellery and *zār*

The focus of this research is the use of jewellery, and so my starting point, has been those publications that include jewellery.

Klunzinger 1878

Written by a male quarantine doctor and biologist stationed in Quseir between 1863 and 1875, this work is included in a larger publication on Upper Egypt and the Red Sea. The publication is based on his experiences in Egypt during his stay. Klunzinger devotes two pages to *zār*, here spelled as *Sár*. The report is remarkably neutral in its wording (even though it is part of the chapter on superstition, and other passages in the book evidence bias towards superstition over science) and describes the various stages of *zār*. The jewellery is noticed as well, with some attention for detail. The second edition of publication appeared in 1878, three years after his sojourn in Egypt ended. As his publication spans over a decade of observations during the formative stages of *zār*, it is a valuable resource for these early *zār* varieties.

Le Brun 1902

This early publication by a female author, operating under the *nom de plume* Niya Salima, this book sheds light on *zār* as practised at the end of the 19th/beginning of the 20th century. The author attended two ceremonies and surrounds her report with observations on the importance and beliefs attached to *zār* by its participants. It is unclear in which particular year the events took place, as the publication carries the

57 An exception is Littmann 1950, who provides two manuscripts in German translation about *zār* with notes about all details the original writer, Mahmud Sidqi, included, and annotations of his own.

form of letters in style only: none of them are dated, and they are to be regarded as general letters for a non-specific audience. At the beginning of the letters describing *zār*, she clearly conveys her opinion that the idea of possession is preposterous, but the sincerity with which one of her servants regards *zār* and the jewellery she wears as a result convinces her that, at least to the participants, there is meaning in both the ritual and the objects connected with it.

Kahle 1912

Written by a male author who is convinced that accounts on *zār* by ‘Orientals’ cannot be taken at face value⁵⁸, and that it is very difficult to obtain a reliable account of *zār*. In order to provide such an account, he himself sought and found sources that were reliable to him. This publication offers two accounts of a *zār* and some background information based on other literature. The first is written down by the author himself in Luxor, where a *zār shaykha* and a *zār shaykh* invited him to a performance that was arranged just for him. To show him what a *zār* looked like, they had even gone through the trouble of arranging a man that represented the audience. Technically this would be an eyewitness account, but of a staged event.

The second is a translation by the author of a manuscript produced by an Egyptian friend, who had, at the request of Kahle, found a *shaykha* willing to walk him through him the proceedings. This is not an eyewitness account, nor a description from an authentic event. Oddly enough, the author mentions having visited an authentic *zār* after quite some trouble, but does not include an account of this in his publication.

Thompson & Franke 1913

An article by two female authors associated with the Christian mission in Cairo. The first half of the article is by Thompson, who attended various *zār* events in Coptic homes, but these are not discussed. She describes a *zār* in a Muslim home as an eyewitness account, in which jewellery also is described.

The second part of the article is by Franke. Here, her Christian point of view is more present than in Thompson 1913 and serves as the main reason to describe *zār*, so that missionaries may better understand Egyptian women in order to help them to ‘open the blind eyes’.⁵⁹ The author presents a literature study of *zār*, including eyewitness accounts of others, but not of herself.

Blackman 1927

Written by a female author, based upon her research and personal experiences among the rural population in Upper Egypt during the 1920s and included in her book on the same topic. *Zār* is presented in the chapter dealing with magic and magicians. Interestingly, she discerns two different ways of treating spirit possession: closely related, but carrying different names. From the text, it is clear the author has witnessed several *zārs*. The proceedings as well as costume and jewellery are described in general. One photograph of beaded *zār* jewellery is included. Only in the last sentence of the

58 Kahle 1912, p. 1.

59 Thompson & Franke 1913, p. 289, quoting the Bible.

chapter does her ambivalence show, upon remarking that ‘officials are quite rightly trying to put an end to the holding of the *zār*’.⁶⁰

Winkler 1936

Written by a male author in his endeavour to document Egyptian customs. The author set out with a systematic approach to ask the same questions on a given topic in villages throughout the country. *Zār* is mentioned briefly, but because of his systematic enquiries, this is the only publication detailing where *zār* was, and was not, practised at the time of this field research. Winkler has not observed a *zār* himself, but notes on jewellery that the possessing spirit demands ‘any one piece of jewellery’, without further specification.⁶¹

Littmann 1950

Written by a male author, this publication presents two translated texts by another male, Egyptian author named Mahmud Sidqi. The first text dates back to 1911, the second from 1930. Both were compiled and published together in 1950, accompanied by remarks from Littmann. The 1930 text, forwarded to Littmann by another professor, includes an eyewitness account of a *zār* by the professor’s wife along with three photographs of costumes, that, unfortunately, were not published.⁶² The texts provide a detailed description of jewellery in great detail and are valuable for understanding of jewellery of their respective timeframes, although it remains unclear whether these are eyewitness accounts or general descriptions.

’Abd er-Rasoul 1955

Written by a female author with a clear disapproval of *zār*. She labels it as superstition, primarily adhered to by uneducated people in the country and artisans’ wives in towns. She also notes the practice is certainly not nationwide. According to her, the ceremony itself is merely for fun or to enjoy presents from friends. She then goes on to describe a *zār* ceremony in some detail and is the first to mention jewellery items with spirit images. From her account, it does not become clear whether she describes an event to which she has been privy herself.

Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1962

Written by two male authors with the purpose of documenting folk beliefs and rituals in Egypt from an anthropological perspective. They had a *zār* organised for themselves in 1957, feigning illness that was most likely due to spirit possession. It is, however, unclear whether this event is to be regarded as representative for a *zār* during the 1950s: not only was the patient male, but also a foreigner, a Christian and wielding a considerable research budget. The publication includes a detailed account of jewellery used, published in 1962. This *zār* was held on the property of the family

60 Blackman 1927, p. 200.

61 Winkler 1936, p. 237 ‘*irgendein Schmuckstück*’- the spirit may want just about anything.

62 This was Dr Franz Taeschner. I have traced the manuscript of his wife to the collection of the Universitätsarchiv Munster, but under German law it could not be accessed until 1-1-2024: this book was finished before that date. The photographs are not with the manuscript and their current location is unknown. Personal communication via email Dr. Sabina Happ, January 24th 2019.

of the same 'Abd el-Rasoul who published the 1955 article. She was instrumental in organising the event: given her own opinion regarding *zār*, this makes the authenticity of this occurrence even more questionable.

Kennedy 1967

Written by a male author from the perspective of neuropsychiatry, this report is based on eye witness accounts of four informants in Nubia (Upper Egypt) and fieldwork carried out between 1963 and 1965. The general proceedings of *zār* are described, after which attention is focused on psychological afflictions for which *zār* offers relief. Even though this research is carried out from a more medical point of view, and jewellery is only mentioned in passing, the report does offer insight in *zār* practices in the 1960s in Upper Egypt.

Fakhoury 1968 and 1972

Written by a male author, the report from 1968 describes a weekly public *zār* at the shrine of Sheikh Mahfouz in Kafr el-Elow, followed by two cases of a private *zār*. The time of the events in relation to publication is unclear. Equally unclear is whether the observations are eye witness accounts or related by the *zār* specialist. The description of the public *zār* mentions the wearing of silver jewellery, but as specific for one particular spirit. The two cases of a private *zār* do include jewellery as necessary items in both cases, but in a different light. They relate the story of the mother of a possessed woman who consulted a male *zār* specialist, and that of a granddaughter of another woman. Both were advised to buy specific jewellery items for the respective patients. In this publication, *zār* jewellery is bought upon the advice of a *zār* specialist, but not used in a ceremony. The function of this jewellery was not to please spirits or fulfil their demands, but to keep them away. In this regard, the nature of these jewellery items comes closer to that of an amulet. The author does include the explanation given by the *zār* specialist in Kafr el-Elow of the, in his observation, declining popularity of *zār*.⁶³ In this respect the publication is useful for the change in use of jewellery in *zār* itself, and certainly for a glimpse of the way the practice is regarded.

These two instances are repeated in the 1972 publication, where *zār* is presented in the chapter on practices associated with Islam.⁶⁴ Here, the author discusses the general structure of both a public and private *zār*. Of jewellery, he notes that this may be part of the specific demands of each possessing spirit, alongside particular clothing, food and drink.⁶⁵

El-Adly 1984

Written by a male author, this publication relates a *zār* the author attended seven years earlier in 1977. He presents general information about the proceedings, but in a more catalogue-style of reporting than describing a specific event. The author lists

63 This is the only clear reference in the publication, on p.55: 'the *zār* practitioner told the writer' Whether the two case studies are also relayed by the specialist or witnessed first-hand, is unclear. In the following publication Fakhoury 1972, p. 94-95, it becomes evident that the specialist shared the histories of the two case studies with the author.

64 Fakhoury 1972, pp. 92-95.

65 Fakhoury 1972, p. 94.

groups and families of *zār* spirits and presents a section called 'Amulets of the *zār*'. Alongside a short passage on men attending a *zār* to indulge in homosexual behaviour, this does seem to point to the presence of a certain bias. The jewellery items pictured and described in his work are much older than 1977. All of them are accompanied by a short description and where possible, an attempt to explain their meaning. In this publication, the transition from descriptive eye witness accounts of events where jewellery is actively used to cataloguing and explaining objects that are disappearing is visible.

A final and special mention has to be made of Joseph McPherson, an Englishman living in Egypt from 1901 to his death in early 1946. A selection of the letters to his family were published in 1983 by a relative. McPherson had a keen interest in Egyptian popular beliefs and as such wanted to attend a *zār*. In 1920, an opportunity presented itself when he came across a *zār* in progress, which was greatly disturbed by his presence when he was caught watching the proceedings from an adjoining room. Eventually a compromise was reached, in which his presence was tolerated only if he sat with his back towards the company of ladies participating in the ritual. As curiosity got the better of him, he was able to describe glimpses of what went on, including one tantalizing sentence in which he observed how 'the women in their Bacchanalian frenzy were pulling from their bosoms, and holding carefully concealed in their hands as they danced, some little objects which I in vain tried to get an adequate glimpse of.'⁶⁶

Since the 1980s publications concentrating on jewellery also include *zār* jewellery. The work of Bachinger & Schienerl, published in 1984, presents jewellery with spirit representations in the form of a catalogue. The article series by Weeks, published in *Cairo Today* in the 1980s, is a detailed exploration into what was offered as *zār* jewellery in the 1980s and as such a valuable source, even if not academic.⁶⁷ A more recent study is that of Darmody, who wrote her M.A.-thesis in 2001 on a collection of 200 pieces with spirit representations.⁶⁸ Jewellery with spirit representations also features in the book by Bonotto, published in 2010.⁶⁹ This book centres around jewellery and amulets in Egypt, and contains a chapter about *zār* jewellery with a short description of the ritual as it is carried out in Sudan, and a *zār* the author himself attended in Cairo in 1992.

1.3.3 Discussion

As this short introduction shows, not all sources can be used with an equal amount of credibility in all instances. Two publications stand out for their descriptive detail of jewellery: the work of Littman (1950) and Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich (1962). Of these, the publication of Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich is most often used as basis for identifying jewellery as connected to *zār*. The success and impact of this publication might be explained because it includes many other forms of popular beliefs in the Islamic world, illustrated with lots of photographs. Their work is an alluring account of folk beliefs

⁶⁶ Carman & McPherson 1983, p. 245.

⁶⁷ Weeks 1983-1986.

⁶⁸ Darmody 2001.

⁶⁹ Bonotto 2010.

encountered in places such as Turkey, Syria and Egypt and is still a very valuable source in terms of documentation of the materiality of informal rituals. Unfortunately, this source proves to be somewhat problematic when it comes to *zār*. Two foreign Christian men with a budget had a *zār* organised upon request, by someone who according to her own publication thought of the practice as superstitious tradition for the ignorant and a form of entertainment for, presumably, the better educated. As stated above, the authenticity of this event cannot be taken at face value.

The other source with a high degree of descriptive detail is Littmann. His publication is eclipsed by the work of Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich, even though it was published only 12 years earlier. Instead of an illustrated compendium of amulets and talismans, the publication of Littman is an annotated translation of two texts. The texts themselves stem from 1911 and 1930 respectively, and are therefore illustrative of two timeframes in the history of the Egyptian *zār*.

All the aforementioned publications offer insights in the proceedings of *zār* and the use of jewellery to varying extents, and can be used mindful of their authors' bias and temporal background.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THIS THESIS

In search of understanding what *zār* jewellery is and does, this thesis will take us from storerooms in European museums and the *sūqs* of Cairo, and from the world of everyday spirit engagement in Egypt to Sudan, Ethiopia, Nigeria and further afield.

I start my exploration into the world of *zār* jewellery with an introduction of the background of *zār* itself: its origins, rapid popularity in Egypt, and the initial insights into the ritual provided by the examination of jewellery.

Chapter 3, 'Collected Objects', zooms in on the collection and publication history of *zār* jewellery. The assembly of objects forming the basis for this study is the result of collecting. The choice of objects to collect reflects, among other things, the preferences and economic limitations of the collector, the timeframe of collecting and the available knowledge at that time. This exploration into collected materiality is inherently a study in mediation. Before attempting to understand *zār* jewellery, this process needs to be unravelled first: how do we know what we think we know about these objects? How did various collectors identify *zār* jewellery throughout the decades of collecting, and how has that influenced our current perception? To unpick this puzzle, I will first trace the information with regard to *zār* jewellery that has been published over the course of the last century. Next, I will intertwine this with the collection history of these items: when did these appear on the market? This dual investigation aims to enhance our comprehension of how *zār* jewellery transformed into a decontextualised group of material culture.

Chapter 4, 'Living Objects', approaches the life of *zār* jewellery before it became the topic of publications and collections. Examining both the purpose-made jewellery and the use of bricolage, I contextualise *zār* within the broader framework of African possession religions, and a way of dealing with spirits within the larger Egyptian landscape of spirit things. I propose a definition of *zār* jewellery and explore its various roles within the ritual. But there was more to jewellery in a woman's life than *zār*. There is an entire life of marriage negotiations, economic pitfalls and social dynamics where jewellery, in general, played a pivotal role. This inquiry extends to understanding how

zār jewellery interconnects with the broader spectrum of a woman's life: how did *zār* jewellery fit in her world?

Chapter 5, 'Historic Objects', moves from the significance of *zār* jewellery on a personal level to its capacity as a historic source on a community level. As in many African possession cults, *zār* itself operates as a mechanism for collective memory, employing oral tradition and performance for its transmission. The way *zār* stores and transmits collective memory however is not to be confused with a form of permanent record-keeping: rather, it expresses a collective identity shaped by historic events. But only in Egypt does this collective memory assume material form in the jewellery with spirit images. Concentrating on these images, I will explore their potential to divulge views on Egyptian history and life in the early 20th century as experienced and expressed by women.

Chapter 6, 'The world of *zār*', paints a picture of the changing world these jewellery items belong to and traces the developments that led to their disappearance as well as their origin.

Chapter 7 presents the conclusions of this thesis, followed by an appendix of a case study in the cost of *zār*, a glossary of terms, and a bibliography.

Finally, the catalogue presents a selection of *zār* jewellery pieces from the sample collection. Where pieces from the sample collection are included in the catalogue, I refer to these as 'cat.no. in the catalogue'.