The Zar (Bori) Cult: A proposed integrated psychotherapy module

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Abstract
The zar cult has been described as a dramatic performance, a folk drama, a psychodrama, or a ritual psychodrama.¹ Like festivals and other forms of folk drama, zar combines different genres such as singing, drumming and dancing. It also involves and utilizes artistic expressions and methods such as folk costumes, conventional theatrical devices, make-up, incense, etc. Moreover, the zar rituals take place in a festive mood of feasting and offerings of sacrifices.¹

As folk dramatic performance, zar rituals are psychotherapeutic interventions involving a full-fledged, well-prepared folk theatre. The rituals are woven around the needs of the “zar bride,” which were carried out to fulfill her wishes. She chooses the time, place and duration of the ceremony. During performance, she is seated in the centre stage, and given priority in dancing whenever she feels like doing so.

The shaikha (female zar officer), the charismatic stage director and master of ceremonies, is in full command of the stage. She generates an orchestrated, animated, continuous interaction between drummers, singers and dancers and leads it skillfully to a climax. To achieve this end, a prompter who is also present, keeps spirits up, sustains the required tempo and vitality of the performance, and ensures total involvement.¹

The musical ensemble is composed of experienced drummers and singers. The actors (zar bride, zar patients or victims) and audience (zar fraternity members or curious neighbours) join together in

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one celebratory group; all dressed in their best. They dance (perform) to zar rhythmic music in a joyous atmosphere. The distinctive zar incense and the various perfumes carried by the participants, saturate the air. Drummers, actors and audience enjoy the lavish feast that they eat together, and in the old days, took the liberty of drinking refined alcoholic beverages, smoked cigarettes, and ate exotic Western food.

Zar is practiced in several West, East and North African and Middle Eastern countries. It has been likened to Haitian Voodoo. The zar clientele is formed mainly of female patients who were labeled as suffering from psychoneurotic conditions, attributed to sexual frustration and inferior socio-cultural status, or women of histrionic personalities.

Zar is a predominantly women’s healing cult believed to cure illness, alleviate the manifestations of misfortune, or resolve conflict alleged to be due to the invasion or possession by ‘zar spirits’ that influence health and disease. The renowned Tigani El Mahi contends that in psychiatric management of some cases, zar proved to be a more reliable alternative than dream interpretation. He concluded that the zar archetypes stand for specific types of personality traits whose moods, temperaments and predispositions are manifest.

Zar is alleged to be therapeutically beneficial as a form of group therapy and psychodrama. The various modalities mobilized in the group setting of zar allow for special support, identification, projection, abreaction and socially accepted ventilation of in-bent emotions. It is also thought that the therapeutic effect of zar could be due to possible hypnosis, psychoanalysis and catharsis.

This project hypothesizes that effective cross-cultural diagnostic, psychoanalytic and therapeutic tools in zar and similar cults could be established. To verify this claim, the project also verifies whether zar achieves total cure, partial treatment, alleviates symptoms or only relieves tension. The contribution of each element of the zar cult will be tested using the most rigorous methods of assessment and measurement science has provided.

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References


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