

***Al-Zar* in Upper Egypt: A Missiological Perspective**

By Basma Al-Masih

Magic is “a concept used to describe a mode of rationality or way of thinking that looks to invisible forces to influence events, effect change in material conditions, or present the illusion of change” (*Encyclopedia Britannica* s.v. magic). “Magic and sorcery are the influencing of events, objects, people, and physical phenomena by mystical, paranormal or supernatural means. The terms can also refer to the practices employed by a person to wield this influence, and to beliefs that explain various events and phenomena in such terms” (*Wikipedia*, s.v. magic). Magic has been deeply rooted in the Egyptian lifestyle since the beginning of civilization. Just about everyone resorted to magic. It was used in medicine, religion, and technology. Magic pervaded

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all aspects of the Egyptian life.

According to Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno, humans live in an interconnected world which includes spirits, ancestors, witchcraft, curses, magic, and other supernatural beings and forces. These are often seen as hostile to human beings (1999:81). Magic is part of the Egyptian heritage and is still greatly adored today. It is worth noting that Egyptian women, more than men, are more involved in magic, fortune telling, astrology, and other forms of jugglery and magic arts. This paper seeks to profile Muslim women who are involved in the spirit world in Upper Egypt and show its root cause. Recent literature shows that the number of women in Egypt who do engage in spirit practices is on the rise.

A brief history about magic and its relevance in Egypt will be the starting point of this paper. Then a general profile of the women who are involved in magic will be discussed, hinting at three main factors that attract women to magic. The article addresses one kind of magic, *Al-Zar* (or *Zaar*), which is a ceremony that involves the possession of an individual (usually a female)

by a spiri, and takes a close look at *Al-Zar*, its meaning, background, and customs associated with it in order to show the reality behind this practice. Then, the factors that contribute to the popularity of *Al-Zar* among women, the problems that result from visiting *Al-Zar*, as well as the position of Islam about *Al-Zar* will be discussed. Finally, the article will focus on the challenge that Seventh-day Adventists might face in finding alternatives to fill the gap in the lives of those women who were freed from evil spirits.

A Brief History of Magic and Spiritualism in Egypt

Magic has not only always been part of Egyptian life for centuries, but Egyptians were famous in the ancient world for their significant knowledge of its use. As Pinch notes, magic existed side by side with religion, medicine, and technology without

apparent conflict, and it was not unusual for magical and 'practical' remedies for illness, for example, to be used side by side. Everyone resorted to magic, from the pharaoh guarding his country with elaborate magical rituals to the expectant mother wearing amulets to safeguard her unborn child (2003a:191).

The main practitioners of magic during the time of the Egyptian pharaohs were the priests. They were considered the guardians of secret knowledge given to them by the gods to enable them to ward off the at-

tacks of fate. The most respected users of magic were the lector priests. They could read the ancient books of magic which were kept in the temples and in the palace libraries. In the popular stories that were told among the people, the lector priests were imbued with the kind of power which would enable them to bring animals made of wax back to life or to roll back the waves of a lake.

The priests were also involved in performing magical rituals to protect their king and bring about the rebirth of the dead.

By the first millennium BC, their role seems to have been taken over by magicians (*hekau*). Healing magic was a specialty of the priests who served Sekhmet, the fearsome goddess of plague (Pinch 2003).

In the Bible as well as in the Qur'an, the Egyptians are referred to as great magicians, supporting the idea that magic was an important part of their culture. When Moses went to Pharaoh at the command of God, he changed his rod into a snake (Exod 7:10). When the magicians saw what had happened they did a similar thing (Exod 7:11-12); then later they were able to perform two other miracles (Exod 7:22; 8:7).

According to the Qur'an, magic existed before the Egyptians, because the people throughout the prior generations accused the prophets as being magicians or crazy. Surahhht Al-Zariyat 51:52 says: "Similarly,

no apostle came to the people before them, but they said (of him) in like manner, 'A sorcerer, or one possessed.'”

Surah Al-A'raf 7:103-116 gives a similar story, affirming what happened during the time of Moses:

“Then after them We sent Moses with Our signs to Pharaoh and his chiefs but they wrongfully rejected them: so see what was the end of those who made mischief. . . . [Pharaoh] said: “If indeed thou hast come with a sign show it forth if thou tellest the truth.” Then [Moses] threw his rod and behold! it was a serpent plain (for all to see)! . . . Said the Chiefs

communicate with him. Egyptians were impressed by magic and revered it. They thought that magic was something that belonged only to their gods, and that only religious people were able to perform it. No wonder then that the God of Moses showed his power through what was perceived as great magic in the eyes of the Egyptians. The Bible as well as the Qur'an depicts Pharaoh as being unimpressed with Moses' miracle, because he too had his own magicians who could change rods into snakes, water into blood, and bring out frogs.

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of the people of Pharaoh: “This is indeed a sorcerer well-versed. . . . Bring up to thee all [our] sorcerers well-versed.” . . . Said Moses: “Throw ye [first].” So when they threw they bewitched the eyes of the people and struck terror into them: for they showed a great [feat of] magic.

From both accounts of God's dealings with Pharaoh it is evident that he utilized a familiar “style” of communication (miracles) as that used by Pharaoh himself, in order to persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites. Pharaoh could understand and respect miracles and magic, so God used that form to com-

This brief summary of the history of magic in Egypt depicts the deep involvement of Egyptians in magic since the beginning of their civilization. No wonder, as we will see in this article, that various kinds of magic are still widespread in Egypt today. Some forms of magic are more popular than others and have a stronger grip on people. This article will also show that despite the adoption of Islam in Egypt, magic prevails, for there are still many factors that promote and enhance magic in its various forms.

Profile of Women Who Are Involved in the Spirit World

A study conducted by Dr. Mohammad Abdel Azim (2004) indicates that 50 percent of Egyptian women believe in magic and superstition and believe that *Jinn* (spirits) have a direct effect in their lives. *Jinn*, who also appear in the Qur'an, are "a class of spirit creatures made of fire that are often, but not always, evil or mischievous" (Denny 2006:406). Abdel Azim also shows that the number of women who visit magicians and jugglers is double that of men. Egyptians, both men and women, spend more than ten billion Egyptian pounds yearly on fortune telling, magic, and *Al-Zar* ceremonies, and there is one juggler for every 240 persons in Egypt.

Economic Standards of Those Women

Numerous studies have been conducted in Egypt about women with very low income. These studies show that this class of women, more than any other, seeks magic and jugglery. This results from the tremendous stress and pressure which are laid upon such women. They tend to lack any degree of self-confidence and feeling of worth. Because of their extremely low self-esteem, they experience a feeling of fear. They are afraid of their husbands and community, so they seek magic in order to bear a child or in order to remain married to their husbands.

Education and Social Status

Another study prepared by Dr. Samya Saaty, reveals that 55% of the women who go to magicians and *Al-Zar* ceremonies are educated, while 24% are able read and write, with only 30% illiterate. The study adds that 51% of the women who attend *Al-Zar* ceremonies and go to magicians are married, while 21% are *spinsters* (a term still used among Middle Eastern communities which shows the importance of a man in a woman's life) who are looking for husbands. Social status is very important in the Arab world because the community looks down on the woman who is divorced or unmarried. A man for a woman is more important than education for a spinster, according to the community.

The interesting thing about this study shows that 57% of those women who are involved in magic and spirit practices in general admitted that they have not accomplished anything, while 42% thought that they benefited from their experience (Abdel Azim, 2004).

The Origins and Nature of *Al-Zar*

Al-Zar was originally a heathen ritual which started among one of the African tribes. It moved from its original source in Ethiopia to Sudan and then to Egypt and later on to the rest of the Arab world. The word *Zar* is derived from the word *Djar*, who is a heathen god for the people

of Kush. *Al-Zar* reached the Arab world through Ethiopian slaves who came to work in the region (Web 8). This tradition has a strong following in Egypt as well as other Arab societies and involves the human practice of obedience to the *Jinn* and their control or possession of the body.

Al-Zar has a special celebration in which women in particular attempt to please the *Jinn* and avoid their anger. "Attention is focused, rather, on establishing a give-and-take relationship between patients and possessing spirit" (Musk 2003:67). A special

a medium from her mother. If the *Kudia* has no daughter, she passes on her power to one of her assistants. The *Kudia* is able to reach all the *Jinn*, unlike her assistant who is only able to reach the one *Jinni* who has possessed her.

The word *Kudia* is an Arabic word meaning "beggar." Once there was a certain community called the people of *Kudia*. They were known for their cunning and cleverness in obtaining money from others. They often used blackmail to become rich. It is possible that some of those people took up *Al-Zar* as a

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ceremony of offering sacrifices and performing dances accompanied by vigorous and loud rhythms on drums is done for this purpose. This performance is carried out in order to call the *Jinn* by their names. Once the name of a *Jinni* is mentioned, the person who has placed a curse on someone supposedly loses his or her power over the possessed person.

A woman having the title of *Kudia* or *Sheikha* is in charge of carrying out the ritual of calling the *Jinn* or trying to please them. She is usually a black woman who has inherited the role as

profession, thus the woman in charge of *Al-Zar* became known as *Kudia*.

The *Kudia* holds three kinds of *Al-Zar* parties, a weekly party, a yearly party, and a big party. The weekly party is for the sole purpose of pleasing the *Jinn* and showing them respect. The women who attend these weekly parties are *Zar* addicts (Abdel Azim 2004). They believe that attending *Al-Zar* gives them comfort, thinking that they can never live without participating in it. The yearly *Al-Zar* is held during the month of Rajab. The *Kudia* holds this celebration for all

the *Jinn* known to her. The 'Big Party' is where all the combined elements of *Al-Zar* are practiced, such as music, dance, costumes, incense, chanting, and amulets. The purpose of the Big Party is to heal sick women by allowing them to know their *Jinni*, and to please the *Jinn* by offering sacrifices (Web 8).

The instruments which are used in *Al-Zar* are mainly drums and tambourines. It is worthy to note that there is a different beat and rhythm for every *Jinni* (Web 8). The music which is played in *Al-Zar* can have complete control over the women who listen to it. Participants undergo a form of hypnotism whenever they hear a similar beat or rhythm. For example, a woman said, when she was relating her experience:

Often, while I'm cooking for my family, I hear a song neither on the radio nor on cassette. I immediately switch off the fire on the stove, leave the kitchen and the cooking, and start to dance to that song for a long time. I don't know what the reason behind my behavior is (Web 9).

Every *Jinni* has a different and specific demand to ask from the patient who has come seeking treatment including the wearing of amulets, costumes, or performing specific dances. There are different varieties of amulets, but the most significant one is the anklet amulet. The *Kudia* wears a large collection of these amulets made of metal, shells, or plastic. Some of the costumes which the *Jinn* demands are highly complicated,

but the *Kudia* and her assistants must be wearing the required costumes in order to approach the *Jinn*. During *Al-Zar*, men and women exchange clothes to fool the *Jinn* or to resist and fight the magic (Web 8).

Al-Zar is widely popular and has recently been recorded on video tapes to be distributed among the women (Adal 2005), especially in some of the villages in Egypt (Web 8).

Assessment of *Al-Zar*

Islamic scholars tend to believe that this practice of spirit possession (belonging to the *Jinn*) is sexual, physical, and spiritual, and in reality *Al-Zar* is a mix of all three elements. The special attention given to the person's clothes, the colours, and the dances clearly reveal a sexual dimension. Many unlawful and sinful practices hide behind the curtain of *Al-Zar*. Many believe that the ceremonies provide a way for women to release tension or deal with oppression from their men. It is also a way to make up for their sexual suffering and abuse (Musk 2003:67). All these emotions and desires erupt and are released during the violent dancing and the vigorous movements.

Al-Zar is also considered to be a kind of black magic which was, until recently, part of the daily life of millions of people. Despite the fact that black magic contradicts all religious doctrines, *Al-Zar* has become a solution for some of the uncontrollable ma-

terial problems such as poverty and disease. These problems, according to the people who attend *Al-Zar*, are caused by *Jinn*. Thus, people must please the *Jinn* and be reconciled with them through *Zars*.

In ancient Egypt, a story is told about an evil spirit that came upon Princess Bakhtan. People tried to cast out the evil spirit from the princess' body, but all their endeavors were in vane. The evil spirit remained within the body of the princess. This made the god *Khensu*, one of the trinity of Thebes, go to the princess and cast out the

portant role in the political arena, there still is a long way to go for her to reach the same level of education and power as men. The Egyptian woman gained the right to vote and run for public offices in 1956. In 1957 Egyptian women were allowed to run for parliament, thus becoming the first Arab women to have access to a modern parliament. Statistics show that only 40.5% of all women in Egypt have acquired some kind of education. This gloomy figure puts Egypt in sixteenth place among other Arab women (Web 2). Other figures show that 45% of all Egyptians are illiterate

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evil spirit. The god *Khensu* used magic. However, the evil spirit came out of the body of the princess only after *Khensu* fulfilled the demand of the evil spirit by setting up a lavish party with loud music and offering gifts and sacrifices to it (Web 9).

Factors Contributing to the Popularity of *Al-Zar*

1. *High level of illiteracy* (Web 1) and *lack of knowledge* (Abdel Azim 2004). Although the Egyptian woman has enjoyed a tremendous boost during the twentieth century in acquiring education and in playing an im-

with 60% of the women and 36% of the men (Web 7).

Progress in education for women has been very slow and limited during the past two centuries. Egypt, for example, was under the British mandate and other Arab countries were under colonial dominion (British or French) for decades. These foreign "powers were not interested in expanding educational facilities or making them available to women and, as a result, the illiteracy rate among women in Egypt as well as the rest of the Arab world remained extremely high" (Web 5).

As mentioned earlier, the rate of illiteracy among Egyptian women is extremely high. Illiterate women are more naive and vulnerable, are easily fooled, and tend to believe gossip. Add to that the Egyptian setting where people live in very close proximity with each other, which allows women who remain at home to visit each other and gossip and spread news. One woman may tell the others of *Al-Zar* and its supernatural benefits, and many of her neighbors and friends may believe her.

Studies also show that illiterate women tend to have more children than educated ones, while educated women tend to marry at least two years later than uneducated ones. Educated women are more aware of the economic challenges of a large family, thus they are more careful in the area of family planning. It has also been noted that men whose mothers are educated tend not to oppose equal political and employment rights for women. Quite the opposite is true for men whose mothers were illiterate. They strongly oppose any involvement of women in the public life (Web 5).

2. *A strong belief in superstition and legends* (Abdel Azim 2004). The belief in superstitions and legends is widespread throughout the Middle East, especially in Egypt. If you take a taxi in Cairo, for example, you will find either a metal human palm or a blue stone hanging from the mirror. If you visit a

home, you will find a horse shoe on the doorpost. Things like these are widespread because people believe they either bring them good luck or protect them from the evil eye. It seems that Egyptians, as well as other cultures believe, to a great degree, in superstitions and lies that are far from orthodox Islamic beliefs (Al-Sabbagh 1992:140-141).

Since many, if not all, of the women who go to *Al-Zar* believe in the existence of *Jinn*, they try to please them to avoid harm. They do this by repeating certain phrases and sayings. For example, when a little girl falls, people tell her, "You fell on top of your brother who is better than you." The brother in this case refers to the *Jinn*, whom they think is better than that child. They say this to please the *Jinn*. Instead of running and caring for the fallen child, they prefer to praise the *Jinn* to keep them from getting upset.

Because of the widespread belief in *Jinn*, going to *Al-Zar* is not a strange thing to get involved in. When you add the high illiteracy rate among Egyptian women, strange beliefs and superstitions have easily penetrated most communities. Since Egyptian women lack a general education and/or religious teaching, they are more vulnerable to jugglery, black magic, and other kinds of rituals, and more easily become victims of those beliefs. They are also more involved in various kinds of magic than are men.

3. *Escaping reality* (Ameati

2005). There is no doubt that the Arab world is a man's world. Most women tend to be oppressed and abused. They have little to say in decision making. The culture, although changing rapidly today, identifies women as housewives who stay at home to take care of the household chores and to raise children. They are not allowed to get involved in other affairs outside their homes. To escape this gloomy reality, some women try to find something to lift their morale. What could be better than *Al-Zar*.

4. *Belief in rumors* (Abdel Azim 2004). Most people who

of life, then magic and *Al-Zar* become an easy solution.

6. *Plenty of idle time* (Web 4) and *seeking for fun* (Delwani 2005). When women are left at home to take care of the house, they are left with long hours of idle time with little to occupy their minds. Because of all the restrictions imposed on them by their culture, they cannot do much except see other wives and female neighbors who often encourage each other to go to *Al-Zar*, not necessarily to find a solution for a problem, but only to please the *Jinn* or to enjoy themselves (Abdel Azim 2004).

When knowledge, science, technology, and development cannot solve the problems of life, then magic and *Al-Zar* become an easy solution.

visit *Al-Zar* are naive and gullible and are easily fooled. They believe in rumors that say that the *Al-Zar* ceremony helped or healed someone. Because most women in Egypt have not had the chance to receive any kind of education, they get their information from other women like themselves and easily fall victim to the rumors that circulate in their communities.

5. *Magic and Al-Zar are seen as an easy way to solve problems and conflicts*. When knowledge, science, technology, and development cannot solve the problems

7. *A way to unload and talk about personal problems and secrets*. Some women believe *Al-Zar* helps to treat depression for those women who think they can no longer find a suitable friend or relative in whom to confide. They believe that relationships today are established only for personal gain. Since going to a psychiatrist in the Middle East is not popular, women prefer to go to *Al-Zar*. "If women are worried, or under some kind of emotional strain, *Al-Zar* ceremony will help them to relax and be at peace. If they have a guilty conscience,

the blame can be transferred, at least temporarily, to the *Jinn* of *Al-Zar*. Certain social pressures also find release in the intensive group interaction. In some instances, it would appear that *Al-Zar* ceremony provides an effective means of identifying and treating actual mental illnesses” (Musk 2003:268).

Women are also more emotionally sensitive than men are, thus they tend to share their feelings with anyone who comes their way, allowing the magician or the juggler to take advantage of their vulnerability and deceive her with his bewitching solutions.

8. *A blurred and confused understanding of Islam* (Abdel Azim 2004). Poor illiterate women do not and cannot read the Qur’an, the *Hadith*, or any other religious books. They usually rely on their husbands and on cultural traditions for spiritual knowledge. An illiterate woman is in most cases married to a poor uneducated man as well. Therefore, she has no one to teach her the true doctrines and beliefs of Islam. Her understanding of Islam is blurred and mixed with other superstitions, for folk Islam is widespread in the Middle East.

9. *Fear of the unknown and the future*. Women by nature are more afraid of the unknown than men are. They want to know the future and be secure from the unknown. *Al-Zar* fills this need by offering an answer to the unknown or satisfying their eagerness to do something to prevent evil.

10. *Treating incurable illnesses*. Many women go to *Al-Zar* to treat hysteria by engaging in violent dancing, loud chanting, and repeating certain phrases to cast out evil spirits. They also believe that *Al-Zar* ceremonies can treat many other incurable diseases, whether psychological or physical. Dr. Abdul Rahman Isawi stated in one of his reports that “20% believed in the effectiveness of *Al-Zar* in healing incurable diseases” (Web 8).

A story is told about a young man who woke up one morning with a severe pain in his back. The doctors could not find a reason for his pain, so his mother arranged to have a *Zar* ceremony for his healing. When the women started dancing, one of them stopped and approached the young man telling him, “Why did you throw a stone at them?” The young man did not understand what the woman was talking about, so she lead the people to the back yard of his house and told him what he had done. Then the young man remembered that he had thrown a stone which according to the *Shaikha* (*Kudida*) fell on one of the *Jinn*, who sought revenge by causing the pain in his back.

The *Shaikha* asked the *Jinni* for forgiveness and slaughtered a hen to please the spirit. The next day the young man woke up as if nothing had happened (Adal 2005).

11. *Solution for barren wives*. When a bride is unable to become pregnant with a child, she

goes to *Al-Zar* for a solution. She believes that a session of *Al-Zar* will allow her to bear children.

A university student, married for five years, had not given birth to any children. The doctors assured her that there was nothing physically wrong with her, but they could not help her. Therefore, she went to *Al-Zar* to find a solution to her problem. When the girl was asked whether she thought she would get pregnant, she replied, "I don't believe in *Jinn* and magic, but when I heard about other ladies getting pregnant, I was motivated to come and attend *Al-Zar*" (Abdel Azim 2004).

From this simple story, we can see that even educated

who had never married despite the fact that many men came to propose to her. She had been engaged many times, but just before the marriage, her wedding was cancelled for no obvious reason! Therefore the mother, along with her daughter, attended *Al-Zar* seeking a solution (Delwani 2005).

However, some women do not have any social, physical, or psychological problem, but they still go to *Al-Zar* just to please the *Jinn* and associate and be close to them.

From the above factors, it is clear that some women will find in *Al-Zar* a solution to their needs

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women, out of desperation, do go to *Al-Zar* although they may not necessarily believe in it.

12. *Other social, marital, and economical reasons* (Delwani 2005). A woman may want to keep her husband from marrying a second wife, or she may want to harm other women, or she may desire to find a husband, or to ask for protection or success for her children, so she participates in *Al-Zar*.

The story is told of an illiterate village woman in Egypt who had a thirty-year-old daughter

and problems. Some women participate even when they do not believe in the ritual, but in their desperation they seek answers through magic.

Problems Resulting from Visiting *Al-Zar*

A recent report from the Egyptian security police reveals that the most frequent problems which women face when they go to *Al-Zar* are rape, confiscation of jewelry, and loss of money. In a few instances, there have also been cases of murder (Abdel Azim

2004). One example tells of four men who tied up a woman patient and beat her up with clubs until she died. When the men were interrogated, their excuse was that they were trying to cast out the evil spirit from her. They went on to say that the evil spirit came out of the woman when she died and possessed another woman. They tried to follow the other woman to cast the *Jinni* out of her too, but the police intervened or the second woman would have probably died as well (Web 8).

In Bill Musk's book *Touching the Soul of Islam*, he tells a story about a woman who eventually found herself addicted to *Zars*. "A woman in her thirties, at the age of twelve, was hit by her brother in the privacy of her home. As a result of the blow she felt nauseated, her face was swollen, her eyes stared, and she refused food. A *shaik* consulted by her mother attributed the child's condition to possession by a *rieh* (spirit of a bathroom) and recommended that the girl attend a *Zar*. The mother refused to comply with his advice, however, and the girl's sickness grew worse daily. Often she felt that people were jumping on her when she was in the bathroom. Finally, the girl's grandmother took her to a *Zar*, and for three consecutive weeks thereafter the girl visited Mari Guirguis and Amir Tadros Churches as the *Al-Zar* practitioner had ordered, running about kissing the crosses and statues each time. After completing the church visits, she regained her appetite and began

to act normal. Now, whenever the patient feels nervous or aggressive, she attends a *Zar* ceremony" (Musk 2003:130, 131).

Many women use *Zars* as an excuse to practice things that are forbidden by both their culture and their religion such as deviant sexual practices and drug use—things that cause significant problems that then have to be dealt with.

The Position of Islam about Al-Zar

Orthodox Islam strongly opposes any form of magic or superstition. The Qur'an says,

They followed what the evil ones gave out (falsely) against the power of Solomon; the blasphemers were not Solomon but the evil ones teaching men magic and such things as came down at Babylon to the angels Harut and Marut. But neither of these taught anyone (such things) without saying: "We are only for trial so do not blaspheme." They learned from them the means to sow discord between man and wife. But they could not thus harm anyone except by Allah's permission. And they learned what harmed them not what profited them. And they knew that the buyers of (magic) would have no share in the happiness of the Hereafter. And vile was the price for which they did sell their souls if they but knew!"(Surahhhh 2:102).

Islam's prophet Muhammad considered magic as one of the great sins which destroys nations and individuals and harms people here on earth as well as at the end of time. Islam teaches that those who practice magic

will not enter heaven, do not belong to the community of the believers, and will have their prayers rejected.

Muslim scholars consider magic as *Kufr* (unbelief or infidelity) or leading to it. Islam forbids Muslims to go to fortunetellers to ask about the secrets of the future and forbids them from using magic or magicians to treat any kind of illness or to solve any difficult problem in life. “Say: None in the heavens or on earth except Allah knows what is hidden: nor can they perceive when they shall be raised up [for Judgment]” (*Surahhhh An-Naml*)

Although neither the Qur’an nor the *Hadith* speak about *Al-Zar* by name, it is evident that Islam clearly forbids all the practices that go on in connection with it. It is certain that if *Al-Zar* was practiced at the time of the prophet Muhammad he would have strongly condemned it since it involves communicating with *Jinn* and evil spirits, allows women to worship other gods beside Allah, which is considered *shirk*. It also involves slaughtering sacrifices for *Jinn* rather than for God, wearing certain amulets, rings, clothes, and colors to prevent their anger and harm, which is *kufr* because

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27: 65; Al Kardawi 1994:222).

An Egyptian Muslim writer by the name of Hamdi Rizk wrote the following:

If we follow the news about magic and juggling in our Arab and Muslim countries we will discover that the issue is not any less tragic than what is taking place in France, America, Germany or other countries. Our Islamic land should be different from those. Magicians and fortunetellers should find no market among Muslims where our religion condemns and forbids it, and considers it among the greater sins. Magic goes further than that and seeks the devil for assistance and worship, which is considered *Shirk* [polytheism or idolatry] (Web 6).

by doing so people show they fear *Jinn* more than they do God, which places *Jinn* at an elevated level higher than God.

Relating to *Al-Zar* from a Missiological Perspective

As this article has shown, ministry in a Muslim context, particularly among women, will very likely bring people face to face with *Al-Zar*. This is a complex and difficult practice to deal with effectively from the point of view of the women involved and the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s perspective on spiritualism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with these issues in any

depth. However, a few comments will hopefully inspire further study into this complex issue.

Musk offers some useful insights when he says

exorcism of the spirits possessing Muslim women in their *Zar* rituals by a Christian missionary . . . would leave a large gap in the social and psychological make-up of the women's world. As much attention would need to be paid to the discovery of alternative Christian customs that fulfill women, as to the spiritual confrontation involved in the encounter itself. Sensitivity to the unspoken needs beneath the surface of the *Zar* ritual will assist the Christian missionary both in addressing the demonic in the Muslim women's world, and also in providing meaningful alternative expressions for her social, psychological and spiritual longings (2003:268-9).

Providing a suitable alternative is very important, but it should happen under the influence and leading of the Holy Spirit. Other Christians might not face as much difficulty in finding alternatives as Seventh-day Adventists, because Adventists must take into consideration all the biblical and denominational beliefs and doctrines. Music, for example, is one of the things that might be a challenge. In the book, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, it says that, "Music is a gift of God to inspire pure, noble and elevate thoughts. . . . Debased music . . . destroys the rhythm of the soul and breaks down morality" (1988:284). The music in *Al-Zar* produces the trance and motivates suggestive sexual movements. Finding a bib-

lical functional substitute for this aspect would be a challenge.

Knowing and meeting the needs of the women who resort to *Al-Zar* is very essential if a lasting solution is to be found. If the evil spirits who possess a woman would be exorcized, or when dealing with habits that are under the control of Satan, it is important that the void caused by casting out the evil spirits be replaced with God's presence.

Without a vital connection with God, through the surrender of ourselves to Him moment by moment, we shall be overcome. Without a personal acquaintance with Christ and a continual communion, we are at the mercy of the enemy and shall do his bidding in the end (White 1990:118, 119).

Exorcism by itself is not enough to free the soul from the devil's prison. Each person must surrender completely to Christ. When this happens,

a new power takes possession of the new heart. . . . A soul thus kept in possession by the heavenly agencies is impregnable to the assaults of Satan. But, unless we do yield ourselves to the control of Christ, we shall be dominated by the wicked one. . . . The only defense against evil is the indwelling of Christ in the heart through faith in His righteousness (White 1990:180).

Only Christ's power can fill the gap in anyone's life and help a person remain free from the power and influence of evil spirits. When Christ is in the heart, if the unclean spirits come back, they will not find the heart empty

so will not be able to possess it again (Matt 12:43-45).

Conclusion

As has been noted in this article, magic has existed for thousands of years and is affirmed in both the Bible and the Qur'an. History has also confirmed the Egyptian people's involvement in magic in the past. Because magic is deeply rooted in their history, customs, and culture, various kinds of magic are still found in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Women seem particularly susceptible to the enticements of *Al-Zar* because for many it is a way of escaping the reality that oppresses them in the Middle East. When women are not involved in other activities outside their homes, they search for something that will take them away from their gloomy reality. Desperation for something new drives them to believe gossip and rumors that often lead to involvement with spiritualistic forces, especially if there is a hint of a promise for solutions to their problems and misery.

Since science, knowledge, and technology do not provide a solution for many everyday problems, Egyptian women cling to magic instead as the only resource that promises to fulfill their needs. Unfortunately, many Muslim women engage in forbidden practices like *Al-Zar* because they do not know their Qur'an. Their religious illiteracy leads them to fear the future and the unknown and drives them

to refuse to accept the reality of having incurable illnesses, being infertile, losing a husband, not being able to find a husband, and many other issues that they face in their daily lives.

This gloomy picture of the involvement of Egyptian women in the spirit world will not change unless special attention will be given to women from childhood. Each girl should be fully equipped to carry different responsibilities knowing that she has a role in building her community and lessening its misery. She should be educated morally, socially, spiritually, physically, and legally, so she can contribute to society in a positive way (Fadl 2001).

Superstitions and *Al-Zar* in particular are weapons aimed at the helpless. Setting women free will only happen through education, worship, and the power of the Holy Spirit and when the manifestation of Jesus Christ enters the lives of those who have been trapped by magic and *Al-Zar*.

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